

Acupuncture Adventure in Guatemala

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As a holistic practitioner, it's very gratifying to be able to teach our patients natural ways to regain and maintain their health. As the saying goes, "The mark of a true professional is one who prevents what they treat." It's especially rewarding and fulfilling to have been able to teach acupuncture in the country of Guatemala to trained "health promoters," many of whom are Mayan descendents.

I was a member of a team of acupuncturists from North America promoting acupuncture in Central America, as a member of the Guatemala Acupuncture and Medical Aid Project (GUAMAP), a program that has provided acupuncture training and support in Guatemala since 1994. At that time, Guatemalan refugees had returned to a newly developed community and needed access to reliable, inexpensive, practical, sustainable health care. Acupuncture certainly meets this requirement.

The Guatemalans requested training in acupuncture to treat acute and chronic health conditions, such as gastrointestinal, respiratory and neuromusculoskeletal problems, posttraumatic stress, malaria, migraines, women's health issues, etc. The primary focus of instruction on this trip was women's health. Each morning, a team member started the morning session with *qigong* exercises. For several days, new material was taught and discussed. Then we observed and assisted the students in treating more than 150 patients of all ages at several all-day clinics. Many of the students and patients traveled many kilometers by foot before being able to catch a bus, if they could afford one, with children in tow, to reach the clinics.

Numerous conditions were presented and treated in the clinics, many pertaining to women's health - menorrhagia, uterine prolapse, menopause, PMS, pregnancy, fibroids and ovarian cysts, as well as headaches, diabetes, edema, hyperthyroid goiter, arthritis, knee, foot, shoulder, neck, low back pain, sciatica, and children with asthma, malaria and dengue fever. We assisted the students with point locations, NADA protocol, and stimulating acupoints with moxa and electric.

Whenever possible, I presented other holistic health approaches, including nutrition and exercise. I taught some patients how to perform vision improvement exercises for complaints of eyestrain, fatigue and poor vision. Very few Guatemalans have access to eyeglasses, so this was an ideal environment to encourage natural vision. I demonstrated several eye exercises they could easily do while waiting to receive their acupuncture treatment and could continue daily. Several patients with back pain also learned some spinal stretching exercises and proper body mechanics to avoid re-injury.

One of the patients had a painful bunion. On examination, I demonstrated how the bunion was mechanically reduceable by applying pressure on the plantar side of the metatarsals. When the arch is increased, the laterally protruding big toe pulls inward toward normal positioning. The patient's shoes had no arch support at all. I demonstrated some exercises to increase his arch, and also how to make a support for inside his shoe to promote arch restoration and bunion correction.

We treated several women who suffered with chronic cough, respiratory illness and lung deficiency

due to pesticide exposure from working in the fields. Many women presented with qi and blood deficiency syndrome due to multiple, close pregnancies and subsequent lactations, with insufficient nutrition and rest. All of the patients were extremely appreciative of the treatments they received in the clinics. Many stayed overnight with their families to get a second treatment the next day.

We taught, ate and slept in a large community center with a large dining room, a large classroom - complete with handmade desks, blackboards and ceiling fans - and restrooms with showers (cold water only!). Our sleeping quarters contained comfortable cots with mattresses. Some of us brought mosquito nets to cover our cots; however, I only heard one mosquito at one time during all the nights we were there. The dorm also had large windows, which were completely screened to keep out the bugs. I regularly took extra garlic capsules to ward off possible bug bites, homeopathic malaria nosode, and an anti-malarial Chinese herbal formula.

We were well taken care of with three varied meals and two snacks of freshly baked bread daily. The food was cooked over a large wood-burning stove. Breakfast often included omelets with rice and black beans (good blood-builders). One of our favorite meals was scrambled eggs with chopped green beans. Lunch was the heartiest meal, featuring chicken or beef, rice, potatoes, and black beans or salad. Dinner included rice, black beans and sometimes a delicious roasted plantain in a black-bean sauce. Our cook provided a variety of creative meals, all of which were very satisfying. And, of course, all meals included all-you-could-eat, freshly made, warm tortillas.

We started calling our school GUA, or Guatemala Universidad de Acupuntura. We even had GUA T-shirts made! My teaching group consisted of five acupuncturists from Arizona, Virginia and Canada. One member actually had served for two years in the Peace Corps in Guatemala. Now, we were serving and teaching in a "Health Corps" to bring peace through health.

We were in Guatemala for 10 days of teaching, encouraging and sharing with 30 conscientious students of acupuncture, who now return to their various villages to also teach, encourage, share and practice acupuncture throughout their country. Interestingly, acupuncture was once a part of ancient Mayan civilization. On our last day, we ventured to the town of Tikal to admire and climb some of the ancient (1500 BCE) Mayan monuments.

I am proud to have been able to participate in this acupuncture training program, perhaps the only one of its kind in the world. I highly recommend this experience to other adventurous acupuncturists. It's very rewarding to promote acupuncture around the world, especially when there is a teaching program to enable them to continue on and help their villages with acupuncture - a real example of sustainable health care. For more information, visit www.guamap.org.

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