

Acupuncture Can Reduce Drug Costs for Pain Patients

Editorial Staff

One of the best ways to demonstrate the effectiveness of acupuncture is by looking not only at clinical results, but also at potential cost reduction compared to standard medical treatment. A study from Spain, published in the June 2007 issue of the journal *Acupuncture in Medicine*, showed there is a cost benefit to acupuncture treatment in terms of reduced use of analgesic and anti-inflammatory medications.

A research team led by Jorge Vas, MD, examined the records for 5,981 patients who sought treatment during a nine-year period, in order to determine the effectiveness of acupuncture for non-oncological pain. A telephone survey was conducted on the patients. As one of the outcome measures, the researchers recorded the pain medications taken by patients at both the start and the end of the treatment cycle, along with determining the retail value of those drugs. A five-point Likert scale was used to assess consumption of analgesic medications:

- 0: No painkillers required;
- 1: Painkillers taken occasionally or below the dose recommended for the process;
- 2: The painkillers recommended for the process, in accordance with clinical guidelines, are taken;
- 3: The standard dose for pharmacological treatment is increased;
- 4: It is necessary to increase the number of painkillers and/or their dose on a continual basis.

An extra point was added if the patient did not take analgesics or anti-inflammatory medications, due to pre-existing contraindications, but a score of 4 was never exceeded.

In looking at the cost for medications consumed before and after acupuncture treatment, the researchers found the mean difference to be €7.1 (US \$9.70) per week, per patient. The greatest cost saving was for patients with headaches, with a mean difference of €26.1 (US \$35.70) per week, per patient. The smallest difference was for patients treated for neck pain, with a mean difference of €6.6 (US \$9.02) per week, per patient.

Among the 5,690 patients who completed treatment, the mean success rate was 79.7%, with the highest rates (93%) for patients with headache. The mean reduction in pain intensity amounted to a 67% fall from baseline levels. Patients with acute or sub-acute pain fared better than those with chronic pain. No severe adverse event was recorded.

In looking at the findings, the researchers concluded: "The favorable response rate obtained for most of the patients, the absence of severe adverse events and the reduction in the consumption of analgesic and anti-inflammatory drugs all suggest that our experience could profitably be extended to other primary health care clinics for the treatment of nonmalignant pain."

