

17th International AIDS Conference: Increasing Appreciation of Traditional Healing

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The XVII International AIDS Conference was held in Mexico City Aug. 3-8. More than 23,000 delegates attended including dignitaries such as President Calderon of Mexico, U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon, former U.S. President Bill Clinton, Margaret Chan of the World Health Organization, and numerous European leaders of state.

The conference theme focused on the need for continued universal action in terms of education, prevention and treatment. Workshops emphasized the need for comprehensive planning for the next 15 years of the epidemic. The critical need for access to care, including pain and symptom management, was addressed in the context of developing a holistic approach. Universal access to care remains an ongoing issue for both developed and developing nations. Dr. Peter Piot, executive director of the United Nations AIDS program, discussed the current state of the pandemic and called for human-rights issues to be integrated into the international response.

News of advances in treatment and development of innovative classes of medication was heralded and welcomed. Despite ongoing improvements, however, individuals using medications continue to experience an array of side effects. More than one-third of individuals reported that their primary reason for discontinuing treatment was due to side effects.¹ Among individuals discontinuing antiretroviral therapy, more than half cited problems with gastrointestinal side effects and fatigue as their reasons for stopping treatment.

News about co-infection with hepatitis C centered on the ongoing development of pharmaceutical treatment, which is an area still requiring attention since medications that are effective and nontoxic have not yet been released. The need to provide care for women, including addressing post-traumatic stress and depression, was highlighted. Organizational linkages that promote empowerment continue to be important.

For acupuncturists working with patients who are dealing with any type of autoimmune disorder, these issues and symptoms are not unusual. Our patients frequently report medication interactions and other side effects, as well as ongoing fatigue. Ongoing stress and depression are common as well. We know from our clinical experience that favorable outcomes and symptom reduction can be achieved with appropriate care.

Acupuncture: One form of traditional healing

Acupuncture played a prominent role in this year's conference venue. Sample treatments were offered in the Traditional Healing Zone of the Global Village as well as in the conference center. The Global Village serves as a center for networking and cultural exchange and offers a variety of programming for conference delegates. Faculty and students from the acupuncture school in Mexico City joined Boston colleagues in making treatment available to conference attendees. The school's name is the National School of Medicine and Homeopathy and it has a number of departments, including the Colegio Mexicano de Acupuntura Humana. Members of the faculty

informed us of their upcoming international conference and invited U.S. colleagues to attend and share our experiences and perspectives.²

In the Traditional Healing Zone, more than 230 sample treatments were administered in four afternoons. Delegates from more than 15 countries experienced acupuncture in a group setting, while the majority of these delegates had previously received acupuncture, many people were interested in trying it for the first time. Issues related to stress, musculoskeletal pain and headache were the top reasons for wanting to receive an acupuncture session.

Some individuals returned on the days following their first treatment, often bringing friends or relatives with them. We sometimes had the opportunity to treat three generations in one family! The task of organizing activities for the Traditional Healing Zone was coordinated by Pathways to Wellness. A student from New England School of Acupuncture, Jess Gerber, attended the conference and assisted with logistics and treatment activities.

Programming in the Traditional Healing Zone focused on many types of indigenous health. Tia Eagle's Claw, the last in his clan to be trained in traditional healing, came from Vancouver, British Columbia to share storytelling and other approaches from North America's First Nation. A yoga instructor from New Zealand who has been diagnosed with HIV/AIDS taught several classes and demonstrated healing breath and movement. An Irish nurse provided sessions of reiki and massage. Open discussions on traditional African healing and indigenous forms of Central and Latin American healing were held. A balance of experiential therapies and didactic discussion rounded out each day's events.

A poster presentation at the conference dealt explicitly with acupuncture. Ian Hodgson of the School for Health Studies at the University of Bradford in the United Kingdom, and Laura Louie, founder of the Laura Louie Hope Foundation of Vancouver, British Columbia, provided information about evaluating acupuncture as an intervention for symptom relief and improvement of quality of life. Their work centered on their group's experience in Northern Thailand.³ Their presentation reported on results of surveys administered to people living with HIV/AIDS; results of the survey included significant improvements for most areas of quality of life. Respondents reported that they noted improvement in general health, energy, ability to work, improved sleep and decreased stress. Even nonspecific ailments that were not the primary reason for treatment showed evidence of benefits from acupuncture; some of these included increased appetite and improved quality of sleep. Overall benefits of treatment indicated reduction in symptom severity. Hodgson and Louie's findings indicated that an integrated approach including acupuncture had a positive impact on quality of life.

Another theme noted by Hodgson and Louie was the social networking effect resulting from the therapeutic interaction between acupuncturist and client, as well as the positive interactions between patients, and the safe environment provided by the clinic. The experience of acupuncture in these contexts helped to transform patients into "ambassadors for acupuncture." In this way, patients would promote the service to their families and friends. Patients also expressed their desire to continue treatment beyond the initial three months of care.

Survey results and clinical experience of this project also indicate that acupuncture is well-tolerated and safe, with no adverse complications being reported. The authors concluded that treatment can be cost-effective, even in resource-poor settings.

Student perspective

New England School of Acupuncture student Jessica Gerber attended her first international

conference and shared some of her experiences as a developing professional: "The conference was an excellent opportunity for me to put my training to the test. The patient-provider interaction was extremely important. I used my TCM theory and adapted it to the setting of providing mini-treatments in a community setting. Given that it was necessary to adapt the medicine to fit the environment without compromising its integrity, I think we were able to effectively manage to do that."

The highlight of the conference experience for Gerber "was the number of people we were able to reach in such a short time. Being able to provide treatments for 50 to 60 delegates in a period of three hours a day was powerful; it gave me an appreciation for the magnitude of this medicine because I was able to experience it at such a large scale. What a great way to promote acupuncture! This experience gave me confidence and it was an unbelievably enriching experience."

The treatment experiences in the Traditional Healing Zone as well as the information described in presentations and discussions indicated that acupuncture can be a medium for promoting connection between people. Treatment appeals to people across many cultures, irrespective of borders.

As we promote acupuncture through our various professional approaches, being mindful of the spirit of the medicine can only enhance the experience of our patients and ourselves as providers. The profound richness of this healing tradition continues to be highly relevant in the 21st century, whether we are working with people affected by epidemics or with those who are living with physical and social stresses that are prevalent today.

References

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2. Information on the conference is available at www.filasma.org.
3. Louie L, Hodgson I. The Mae On Project: using acupuncture in HIV symptom relief in Northern Thailand. *HIV Nursing* Autumn 2006:19-21.

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