



ACUPUNCTURE & ACUPRESSURE

The Modern Acupuncturist

Kimberly Thompson, LAc

You studied ancient Chinese medicine, but I'll bet you don't practice it! Contrary to popular belief, our medicine has evolved A LOT over the years. Let's take a brief walk through history and discover the differences between ancient and modern acupuncturists. Then we'll take a look at what type of medicine you currently practice. You just might be surprised to see where you land.

The Evolution of Acupuncture

Three things happened to advance our medicine that are important to recognize. First, as acupuncture moved from China to the rest of the world, it changed. As the world expanded through transportation and communication, so did our medicine. It first reached Japan in about 6 AD and then trickled out to Korea, Vietnam, and other Asian nations, eventually reaching Europe and North America. With each new location, different diagnostic and treatment styles developed.

Second, treatment tools and sanitation techniques have expanded. Thank goodness! You can be glad you weren't an acupuncturist back in the stone ages. The popular treatment tools at the time were stone needles and knives. Ouch! Metal needles didn't arrive until the Bronze Age. Later, silver and gold needles became the new big thing.

Acupuncture became safer with the advent of modern sterilization techniques. Although autoclave machines haven't been used in common practice for quite some time, I actually had to study the settings for them in order to pass my exams in college. Can you imagine living in an era where you had to reuse acupuncture needles? Remember, those old silver and gold needles were expensive and you wouldn't want to dispose of them. Fortunately, reliable, clean and safe disposable needles as we know them today became common in about the 1970's. Of course, we now have many treatment options besides needles, which we'll talk about in a bit.



And finally, diagnosis and treatment strategies have evolved over time. As the diseases of the world have changed, so have our strategies for diagnosis and treatment. The recognition of infectious disease, known as "Febrile Disease," was introduced during the Han Dynasty (206 BC to 220 AD). The first existence of small pox, for example, can be traced back in Chinese medicine history to the Jin dynasty (281-341 AD). Modern disease like autoimmune disorders were not recognized during ancient times.

With the recognition of new diseases came new treatment styles such as moxibustion and cupping. Unlike treatment styles, diagnostic methods like pulse reading have not historically changed much — that is, until recent times. Advances in technology are bringing changes in diagnostic methods for modern acupuncture. We'll discuss more about that in a bit as well. Are you noticing a pattern of change throughout history? Let's take a look at the medicine we now study.

The Traditional Acupuncturist

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) is what the majority of us studied and practice today, even though it's not "traditional." The term TCM is actually more of a melting pot theory to fit into a Westernized approach to Chinese Medicine, comprising a broad range of medicine practices sharing common concepts developed in China — which include acupuncture, herbology and massage.

In this article, our focus is on acupuncture. In reality, acupuncture has been practiced many different ways throughout history. As the world has advanced with science and communication, we have seen a blending or emerging of these theories into TCM schools.

The Modern Acupuncturist

Western scientific research emerged in the late 19th century/early 20th century. By the end of the 20th century, the scientific world began to analyze the efficacy of acupuncture. Since then, we've

seen tremendous advancements of diagnostic and treatment techniques for acupuncturists. Look how far our medicine has come! With the evolution of modern technology, acupuncture has been a beneficiary. Modern acupuncturists have more opportunities than ever before; our possibilities are unlimited! Let's consider a few points.

Education

College is your foundation. When I graduated from college, I didn't realize how many options were out there. I thought TCM was it. Boy was I wrong. You learned TCM while you were in school, but there are many, many more approaches such as Five Element, Japanese Meridian Therapy, Korean Hand Therapy, Auriculotherapy, etc. Now that you are done learning what you need to "pass exams," you can choose any or all styles of acupuncture that fit you well. You are not limited just by your education. My advice is to find a system that works well for you. There are so many opportunities for continued education; you can expand and develop your style any way you want! Take advantage of that.

Diagnostic Tools

In school, I learned about ancient and traditional pulse diagnosis. The only evolution I was taught on this subject included the creation/differentiation of more pulse types. Can I just say it out loud? Pulse diagnosis is subjective. Most who feel the pulses have different perspectives — based on who they learned from and how long they have been in practice. Have you ever stood around a treatment table with three or four experienced practitioners? Each one feels the pulse and offers a different interpretation. Who is right and who is wrong?

Personal Story #1

When I was in college, I had a professor tell me it would take a lifetime to become really good at feeling pulses. He explained that what he felt now, after 20 years of practice, isn't what he felt previously. Hmm... So, was he treating correctly back then or is he treating correctly now? His comment frustrated me. I had a problem with the 20-year learning curve. I turned 40 while in college. Did that mean I'd be 60 before I was any good at diagnosing patients? This didn't sit well with me. I had student loans to pay off. I couldn't wait 20 years to be successful! I needed to be good at treating patients now. This answer was not acceptable to me. There had to be more than one way.

Did you know modern technology can diagnose the flow of qi and blood in the meridians? They didn't teach me this in school, but it's true! Here's the history.

In the 1950's, the evolution of modern science made an amazing discovery which had huge impact on the acupuncture world. Dr. Yoshio Nakatani developed a system of acupuncture called the "Rydoraku Technique." He discovered that acupuncture points have electrical properties that are different from non-acupuncture points. He discovered that you could measure electrical skin resistance at acupuncture points to find imbalances in the meridians.

Did you catch that? Measurement of electrical skin resistance at acupuncture points can tell you how well qi and blood are flowing through the meridians. It's objective, not subjective. This is really exciting news! Never before, in the history of acupuncture, have we had the ability to record objective findings from treatment to treatment. Subjective findings differ from practitioner to practitioner based on experience, education and opinion. Objective findings, on the other hand, can be recorded, researched and proven. This is a huge advancement in our medicine.

Who said it would take 20 years to become a great acupuncturist? I've got the benefit of both

worlds. While I continue to practice traditional pulse diagnosis, I also incorporate modern electrical meridian diagnosis as well. This approach has evolved a lot since then and it is now called Digital Meridian Imaging, or DMI. Multiple systems have been developed over the years for measuring imbalances in the meridians. Patients love that I have the ability to combine traditional education with modern diagnostic techniques, and show them exactly what's wrong.

Treatment Tools

Remember what you learned in college? Needles, cupping and maybe a little tui na. Okay, that was good experience, right? Now let's expand your horizons by exploring other possibilities. The underlying goal of an acupuncture treatment is to get qi and blood moving in the channels so the body can heal itself. There are so many ways to make this happen. While I enjoy using needles, I also use modern non-needle techniques on kids and other patients who are afraid of needles. Sometimes, I use these tools while traveling or when visiting patients at a hospital where needling isn't allowed.

Some practitioners claim that using modern tools takes away from the energy that they feel through their hands while treating the patient. I disagree. I think the energy practitioners feel during treatment is a way of communication between the patient and the practitioner. Whatever tool you use, whether it be a needle or some other device, is simply the bridge between the patient and the practitioner. Sound odd? Let me tell you how I came up with my theory.

Personal Story #2

I learned to feel energy through my fingers as a massage therapist before entering the acupuncture world. Interestingly enough, I'm 20 years into my journey of developing my ability to feel energy in my hands. I'm guessing the 20-year opinion on pulse diagnosis is probably about right. Imagine my surprise at the ability to feel energy through the needle when I started needling. Later, when I expanded my treatment options to laser and a hand-held microcurrent therapy device, I was surprised again by what I found.

Electrical devices and laser were no different. When working with a modern electrical device, I could still feel the same energetic connection. I knew where to place the device, the most effective angle for treatment, and how long to treat based on what sensation I felt in my hands. It was amazing! I don't know why I was surprised. Acupuncture is energy medicine. Modern technology is beginning to understand how energy medicine works. Bioelectricity in the body is energy and electricity is measurable. We can now measure stagnation in the body through thermography. We can treat with microcurrent, laser and frequency.

Ancient practitioners learned how to evolve this medicine by "feeling energy." Why wouldn't practitioners who are evolving the medicine now "in the 21st century," feel energy through their tools as well? They can. It's exciting to live in the 21st century!

The Best of Both Worlds

Our medicine is unique and we should never forget the foundation from which it came. We have a holistic approach to treatment that's worked for more than 2500 years and has evolved into an amazing medicine with so many possibilities.

Don't ever forget where we came from, but remember this. Progress is good. The advancement of our medicine has been phenomenal up to this point. We, as individuals, can improve our treatment and diagnostic strategies without letting go of the traditional theory we learned in school. In fact, it's our duty to improve.

If you think we can't change because we are practicing the way we did 2000 years ago, it's time to wake up and realize we are not. The founders of Chinese medicine adapted and expanded as the world changed. They developed new theories and treatment styles that worked. I think they would be upset if we didn't continue to grow just as they did. Just because you studied "Traditional Chinese Medicine" doesn't mean you can't use modern technology in your practice. In the 21st Century, we get the best of both worlds! I am a Modern Acupuncturist. Are you?

JUNE 2015