



PATIENT EDUCATION

## Acupuncture on the Big Screen

Sara Calabro, LAc

*9000 Needles* is bringing acupuncture to the masses. The documentary follows Devin Dearth, a 40-year-old former bodybuilder, to China, where he is treated with acupuncture after suffering a massive stroke. The film made a splash at several of last year's film festivals, including the Gotham Independent Film Awards, where it was a finalist. It was directed by Devin's brother, Doug Dearth, whose frustrations with the U.S. health insurance industry during his brother's recovery inspired him to research international options. He spent three-and-a-half months filming in Tianjian, China, where Devin participated in an affordable, comprehensive stroke rehabilitation program that included frequent acupuncture treatments. *9000 Needles* tells a unifying story of how Devin's family and local community put aside preconceived notions about medicine to embrace the solution that offered their loved one the most benefit.

Doug Dearth recently spoke with me about filming his brother's journey and how he hopes it will improve perceptions and accessibility of acupuncture in the U.S.

The movie is fantastic. It really is a must-see for those of us who give and receive acupuncture and also anyone who's interested in the challenges and triumphs of modern healthcare. So first order of business: How can people see it?

Doug Dearth: Thanks. We're working on a plan to do a tour in February, from Los Angeles to Washington, D.C. We'd do screenings in various locations along the way. Our original goal was to release the DVD at the end of January. Logistics are still pending, but we will know more soon. For updates, people can check the *9000 Needles* website or Facebook page. We'll post details there as they become available.

*9000 Needles* is in many ways a tribute to acupuncture. Has the film been well received by the acupuncture community?



I wasn't all that familiar with the acupuncture community prior to making this film, but I have learned that there is some divisiveness. It's been great to see the film bringing together all these different schools of acupuncture. *9000 Needles* has had a huge amount of grassroots support, largely from the acupuncture community. I have been meeting with the AAAOM, trying to educate myself quickly so that we can take that energy and turn it into something that reaches everybody.

Some people have asked me why I didn't look deeper into the factions within the acupuncture world. I didn't want to preach to the choir. I wanted to tell a universal story. Devin is a guy who lives in the Midwest, in Kentucky--these are the people we want to reach. I have been contacted by churches wanting to screen it because of the community and family message. I recently went to Ohio, to a small private college, to talk about how communities and cultures deal with life-threatening illnesses and death. This is helping to improve awareness in parts of the country where acupuncture is not well known. I wanted to open up people's eyes a little bit.

What about the mainstream medical community? Have you gotten much of a response?

Nurses have been very supportive. At the physician level, in general, there has been questioning about whether it was the acupuncture or just the intense amount of treatment that caused Devin's improvements. I get that a lot, doctors trying to discount the acupuncture. But I am hoping that the fact that they are asking the question is still a good sign. It means they are wondering how to prove that it works. My honest answer to their questioning is that I don't care. My brother got the treatment

he needed, treatment that wasn't accessible here.

In the film, you show that your family was resistant to the idea of acupuncture as well.



Devin and Doug Dearth with the physical therapy staff in Tianjin, China. Devin Dearth spent three and a half months in a stroke rehabilitation program.

Yes, and it was actually much more of an issue than what made it into the film. I wanted to show that conflict and concern were there, but that we were able to move past it and focus on a solution. *9000 Needles* is a story about how people can become bigger than themselves when they're willing to open their minds.

Did Devin try acupuncture in the U.S., before traveling to China for treatment?

Devin lives in a very small town of 5,000 people. The closest qualified acupuncturist that we were able to find lives an hour-and-a-half away. Devin would be the first to tell you that he'd prefer to not have to go to China and be away from his family--he's already been there a second time since the filming of the movie--but the logistics of getting him into a consistent acupuncture program has been challenging.

So there's no stroke program in the U.S. comparable to the one that Devin participated in?

There is a lot of talk about people wanting to put together stroke programs here. But to my knowledge, there isn't a place where you can go for in-patient care, and have Western and Eastern treatments. Devin had physical therapy and speech therapy along with acupuncture, all under one roof. That's the biggest challenge with a debilitated stroke patient. When everything is not in one spot, you could spend your whole day traveling to each session.

After watching your brother go through this, what were your takeaways on how healthcare is delivered in China compared with in the U.S.?

There was a simplicity there. As a Westerner, when you first get there, you think it's a little archaic. But Devin got MRIs and CT scans when he needed them. And they didn't take him completely off Western medicine, although they did cut it down when they found a balance with herbs. The integration was nice. One of the biggest differences I noticed was the interaction between Devin and his caretakers. There was an emphasis on touching, and on really making him feel comfortable, safe and confident. It wasn't just the medicine he received. There was an overall approach of trying to keep him in the best state of mind, to create an environment that put his body in the best place to heal itself.

Did anything surprise you about Devin's acupuncture treatments?



Doug Dearth shooting scenes for "9000 Needles" at The Great Wall in China.

I always assumed that the doctors there would speak very metaphysically or philosophically, like there was something mysterious behind acupuncture. But talking with them was the same as talking to any neurologist here in the U.S. They were very medically sound in their opinions. All of their explanations of how the medicine works were based in science and medicine.

One of your initial drivers in making this film was highlighting the shortcomings of the U.S. insurance system. What is your mission for the film going forward?

It's two-fold: to gain awareness for acupuncture and then to allow that to improve accessibility. Better accessibility means that insurance companies support patients who choose this kind of care, and also that the mainstream medical community really accepts this as a viable treatment that should be integrated into our medical system. It makes nothing but sense for a stroke program to integrate acupuncture. There are no side effects; it can only help.

How has working on *9000 Needles* influenced you as a filmmaker?

People come up to me in tears after seeing this film because they are so touched. For me, that makes it a success. There are times when as a filmmaker, your only goal is to entertain people, and that's a valid goal in itself. But when you can make a film that potentially changes people--or at least the way they think--those are the ones that are really important. I don't like the divisive nature of the country these days, so I would like to concentrate on things that help people focus on similar goals rather than differences. Devin's community - a very strongly rooted Christian community - rallied together to send him all the way to China. When we can focus together on common goals, we find answers.

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For more information on 9000 Needles, visit the film's official website [www.9000Needles.com](http://www.9000Needles.com). For more information on the Devin Dearth Foundation, visit [www.devinearth.org](http://www.devinearth.org).

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