

Acupuncture vs Dry Needling: What's the Point?

A common question I am asked, as with most of whom have wielded a 0.something millimeter filament needle in their hands (aka an acupuncture needle) is what is the difference between *Acupuncture* and *Dry Needling*? Without ruffling too many feathers in the needling community, I respond with “all forms of needling are Acupuncture, including ‘Dry Needling’, however Dry Needling doesn’t encompass all what Acupuncture does”. Acupuncture originates from *Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM)* and is over 2000 years old.

In Australia, ‘*Acupuncturist*’ and ‘*Physiotherapist*’, are protected titles i.e. an individual must have the relevant qualifications and registrations with the relevant governing body (in these cases, ‘AHPRA’ – the Australian Health Practitioner Registration Agency) to be able to use these titles. Confusingly however, the modality ‘Acupuncture’ doesn’t require one to have the same qualifications.

What does it mean? As a Physiotherapist many years ago, I did a weekend course (2-days) to be able to do Dry Needling on a patient which is primarily when a needle is inserted into a ‘knot’ or taut band of muscle. I could call it ‘Acupuncture’ as I’m using an acupuncture needle and technically I’m inserting the needle into acupuncture points. In TCM these taut bands of muscle are called “Ashi” points roughly translated as “ouch points” and are just a small part of the Acupuncture system.

Not as many years ago, I completed a 3-year Master degree in Applied Science (Acupuncture) which once completed enabled me to register as an *Traditional Chinese Medicine Practitioner / Acupuncturist*. TCM looks at the entire person and their environment; including their physical attributes, emotional status, lifestyle, relationships etc. Thorough questioning a.k.a. ‘the 10,000 questions’, along with physical observation - including pulse taking and looking at a person’s tongue - which are part of the information collection process to help determine where a person’s complaint/s may have originated.

Was it from premature birth? A traumatic childhood? A bout of food poisoning? Stressful Job? are examples of questions running through a TCM Practitioner’s mind along with a potential pathway for how something like a stressful job may manifest as neck and shoulder pain i.e. stressful job > trouble falling asleep/waking at night > not rested in the morning > overactive sympathetic nervous system (fight or flight system) > poor posture combined with shallow / upper chest breathing > neck and shoulder muscles overactivated by assisting with breathing > muscle overuse / ‘knots’ > pain +/- referral pain into the head (headaches) > poorer sleep and the cycle continues...

TCM Acupuncture is a tool that a Chinese Medicine Practitioner/Acupuncturist will use to help treat someone’s ailments and hopefully **promote real healing by**

stimulating the body's own healing mechanisms. These points are located all over the body in various 'meridians' or 'channels' which closely follow the muscular/nervous/fascial/vascular systems and have recognised functions on the body e.g. points on the legs can help regulate digestion, points on the hands and feet for pain relief, points on the face and head for relaxation.

A TCM Acupuncturist will typically use points close to the sore area together with points further away e.g. Acupuncture points (including Ashi points) around the shoulder, combined with pain relieving points in the hands and feet with relaxation points on the head and face. There is even a form of acupuncture called **Battlefield Acupuncture** where acupuncture needles are placed in specific locations in the ear and may be able to assist with pain relief.

The Acupuncture needles work by stimulating nerves which can lead to the release of pain relieving chemicals from the brain, change the neural circuit activation in the brain, balance the activation of sympathetic (fight and flight) and parasympathetic (rest and digest) nerve system to regulate smooth muscle tone - found in your gut and blood vessels, modulate immune responses to help reduce inflammation and improve blood flow and healing responses as a result of needle micro-damage to the area.

It's worth noting that although acupuncture can work by these mechanisms and provide some great results, everyone responds differently and it's not a magic fix. Acupuncture works best when combined with regular treatments (especially in the initial stages) - similarly to taking a course of antibiotics and not just one pill - and most importantly, lifestyle modifications.

Lifestyle advice such as sleep hygiene, hydration, regulating emotions e.g. stress reducing strategies such as breathing techniques or self acupressure of specific acupuncture points, diet advice such as avoiding fatty, spicy, cold, sugary food and promoting movement and specific stretching and strengthening exercises are also part of an Acupuncturist's toolkit.

So in summary, all needles are created equal, however where they are placed in the body combined with specific self-management strategies can have dramatically different effects.

Want to know more? Feel free to call David Boyd (Registered Physiotherapist and Acupuncturist) on 0466 33 7497, email davidboyd@physmed.co or visit www.physmed.co for more information.