

A Reappraisal of Acupuncture by Adrian White, 1998

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In the last 30 years, a fundamental reappraisal has been taking place in the Western world. This reappraisal has been occurring largely in the UK in the wake of Felix Mann's pioneering declaration that acupuncture points don't exist, acupuncture meridians don't exist, but acupuncture still works. He was expressing the secret thoughts of many people who were trained in both biomedicine and acupuncture, who could not come to terms with the traditional way in which acupuncture was applied but could not see that it could be very effective.

The traditional principles of acupuncture are very attractive and appealing. To reject them provokes anxiety, particularly in a practitioner, perhaps unfamiliar with modern biomedical science, who has invested along time in learning them and sees them as the only possible explanation. But there is not the slightest evidence to support the traditional ideas. Despite detailed research, there is simply nothing can be found to suggest that energy really does circulate in meridians, or that diseases can be caused (for example) by an attack of dampness.

One important point about the reappraisal of acupuncture is that it is being conducted by scientifically trained clinicians who have great respect for the observational skills and accumulated experience of traditional Chinese physicians. What these ancient Chinese doctors observed cannot be disputed, it is only their explanations, based on Taoist philosophy and a vitalistic view of the world, that are unacceptable in the face of current knowledge.

It would be overstating the case to say that the reappraisal has been achieved in an organised way, or that there is a universal agreement on the outcome. But it is now possible to draw the general outline of the way acupuncture may become acceptable within Western medicine, not just for its clinical benefits but also for its underlying mechanisms. Most people agree that acupuncture points are not fixed entities, but simply areas where the nervous system is signalling that it needs to be stimulated. Points are not selected for treatment on the basis of imbalance of energy but because they overlie trigger points, or are in a particular segment, or even have been found to work empirically, with no explanation yet discovered. Meridians are not energy pathways but reflect referred symptoms and the direction of nerve pathways which converge in the spinal cord. Stimulating the body with acupuncture needles does not 'balance the energy' but activates a disturbed nervous system, generally in a direction towards normal function. Acupuncture stimulation can reach important areas deep within the brain, and this fact provides a possible explanation for its distant and far reaching effects in a wide variety of conditions.

This reappraisal of acupuncture extends beyond how acupuncture should be practised and what its mechanism might be. It also incorporates a modern approach to health care, which recognises the need to provide clinical trial evidence to back up anecdotal reports of acupuncture's successes. Only by providing evidence can acupuncture stand alongside other therapies that are already established, and be judged by the strictest criteria of evidence-based medicine. This is the way forward for the acceptance of acupuncture and even its integration in the health service, for appropriate conditions.

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