

THE WHOLE STORY



**ALTERNATIVE
MEDICINE
ON TRIAL?**

TOBY MURCOTT

it'. The RAF, it turns out, has funds to allow doctors to train in a variety of different practices, and acupuncture is one of them. Armed forces around the world are known for their conservatism rather than their willingness to embrace unorthodox ideas. No wonder Mike was stunned.

Cummings did nothing with this information for a year or so but then found himself running a station medical centre and, his curiosity unsated, decided to take a course in acupuncture. He chose a short, practically based offering run by the British Medical Acupuncture Society; this gave him a grounding in how needles can be used to heal. The conventional medical approach to muscular injuries involves a lot of injections of drugs such as cortisone, and Cummings had used this more conventional form of needle insertion as a mainstay of his work, even though, as he admits, he did not always fully understand how it worked. Until that point, however, he had not considered that the needles themselves might be part of the effect. Trained in pharmacology, he assumed that it was the contents of his injections alone that did the work.

On returning to his practice Mike Cummings began using needles extensively. He found that they could be very useful for diagnosis, an extension of his fingers as he probed painful regions and mapped out the extent of the muscular damage. They also became part of his toolbox for treating the conditions he saw. Tense, bunched muscles could be released by inserting a slim acupuncture needle – an instant relief that he could see working before his eyes. Acupuncture became an important addition to his repertoire of treatments. His evidence was that he could relieve patients' pain quickly and easily. His own observations convinced him that there was something to the ancient idea of sticking needles into people to make them better.

When the time came to leave the Air Force he was unsure how to continue as a musculo-skeletal doctor, as that was how

he still thought of himself, rather than as an acupuncturist. Then an unexpected opportunity arose to take over an acupuncture clinic. Naively he expected to turn the practice into a musculo-skeletal clinic and develop a portfolio career in medicine. Instead, the demand for acupuncture was so great that the clinic turned him into an acupuncturist. He now says that had anyone told him when he was in the Royal Air Force that he would become a complementary therapist he would have laughed out loud. Yet this upstanding military doctor has entered the world of complementary and alternative medicine.

Cummings then began to take an interest in the research that had been done on the efficacy and effectiveness of acupuncture. He read the papers, examined the studies and was amazed to find that, according to them, the treatment he used all the time did not work. The published findings were totally at odds with the results he saw in daily practice. Today, after many years involved in research, he reckons that the design of clinical trials is often at fault.

The evidence that convinces the pragmatic Cummings is not an abstract trial where patients are averages and numbers but his own eyes: his patients get better. This personal testimony is a common theme that runs through virtually all that advocates of whatever form of complementary or alternative medicine have to say on the matter, be they doctors, practitioners or patients. First person accounts of success are compelling.

Mike Cummings is one of many thousands of medical doctors adding a complementary therapy to their repertoire. The British Medical Acupuncture Society is a body for doctors and dentists, as well as other health professionals, who also practice acupuncture. But there are physicians who are chiropractors, osteopaths, reflexologists, shiatsu masseurs as well as all those who are homeopaths. In the UK six homeopathic hospitals operate with public funds and medical doctor-homeopaths