



The Health Report

SARAH PRICE

healthreport@sunherald.com.au

Acupuncture more than just a stab in the dark treatment

ACUPUNCTURE practitioners say they have long known of the benefits of the ancient Chinese practice, although critics have not been so sure.

But researchers behind a new study say they have proved acupuncture works beyond the acknowledged placebo effect.

The scientists from two British universities say the results of their study have shown that acupuncture has a "demonstrable physiological effect over and above a simple skin prick".

Dr George Lewith and Dr Peter White from the University of Southampton's Complementary Medicine Research Unit, carried out the study, published in the journal *NeuroImage*, on a group of 14 patients with osteoarthritis.

The researchers used positron emission tomography (PET) scans, in conjunction with the functional imaging unit at University College London, to see what was happening in the brains of the subjects receiving the treatment.

They carried out three different tests. In the first, they used blunt needles on the subjects that did not pierce the skin. The patients knew the technique did not have any therapeutic value.

In the second, they used dummy needles, giving the impression the skin was being pierced whereas it wasn't. The patients believed the treatment was real.

And in the third test, real acupuncture was performed.

In the first treatment, researchers said the scans showed that only those areas in the brain associated with the sensation of touch were activated.

In the second, when the patients believed the treatment was real, scans

showed an area of the brain associated with the production of natural opiates, which act to relieve pain, was activated.

And in the third, when the technique was real, researchers said the opiate centre and another region of the brain, the ipsilateral insular, which is known to be associated with acupuncture treatment and thought to be involved in pain modulation, were activated.

The researchers say the study has shown that the benefits of acupuncture go beyond the placebo effect "caused by the patient's own expectation of feeling benefit from the treatment".

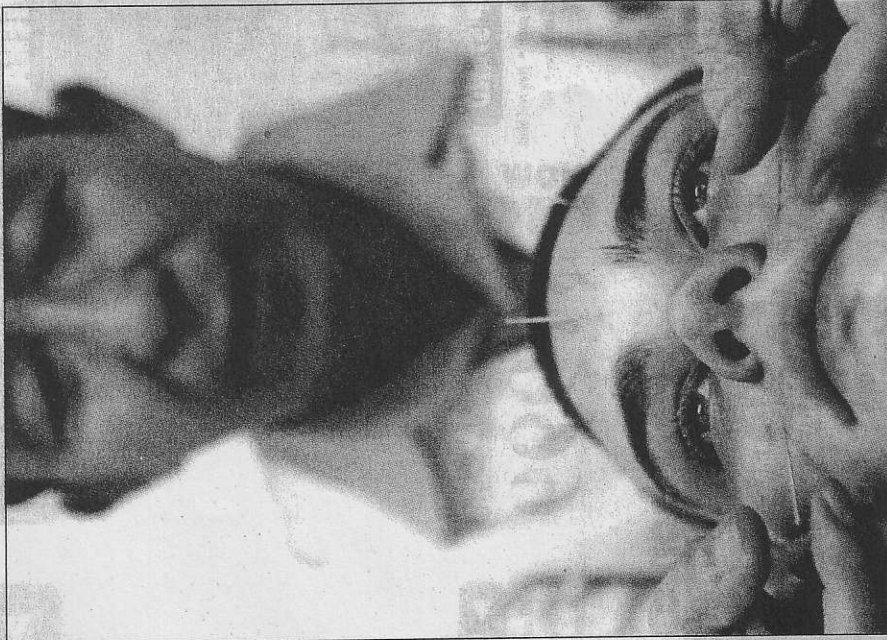
Felix Wong, the director of the Chinese Medicine Clinical Research Centre, professor of obstetrics and gynaecology at UNSW and the medical director of the women and child health division at Liverpool Hospital, said it was known that acupuncture was good for pain relief, but more research of this type was needed to verify its other benefits.

Many Western doctors had been trained to use acupuncture for pain relief, he said.

The issue now was establishing scientific proof that it worked to help with other ailments, such as infertility and irritable bowel syndrome.

The Chinese Medicine Clinical Research Centre is looking at setting up clinical research trials on acupuncture to help ailments such as frozen shoulder, tennis elbow and to help ease nausea and vomiting in cancer patients receiving chemotherapy.

Trials were being conducted on using acupuncture for the relief of menstrual pain and the early results were positive, the professor said.



NEEDLEPOINT: A new study supports the benefits of acupuncture. Picture: JACKY GHOSSEIN

Hoc Ku Huynh, with patient Adam

GOOD NEWS
MEN who include more dairy food in their diet, especially low-fat products, may lower their risk of developing type 2 diabetes, research has found.

The study, published in the *Archives Of Internal Medicine*, looked at 41,254 men, with no history of diabetes, cardiovascular disease and cancer, over 12 years and found that each extra serving a day of dairy food was associated with a reduced risk for type 2 diabetes of 9 per cent.

BAD NEWS
CHILDREN with a family history of mental illness or with a low birth weight or who had a difficult birth may have an increased risk of autism, new research, published in the *American Journal Of Epidemiology*, has found.

Researchers looked at nearly 700 Danish children diagnosed with autism. They said the findings showed there was a strong link between low birth weight and autism.