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The 1850s Aussie gold rush saw Chinese immigration numbers boom. Thousands settled here in search of their fortune and with them came new traditions, new foods, and mysterious medical practices.

The best known of those practices, makes a lot of us Westerners squirm — acupuncture. Now the Chinese have been using acupuncture needles for over 2500 years to cure all nature of ills.

But as a Western-trained medical doctor, it's difficult for reporter Dr Andrew Rochford not to treat acupuncture with some scepticism. So he's on a personal journey to discover if acupuncture works.

Plenty of Australians already think it does, one in seven doctors are using acupuncture now, so there's got to be something to it, but what?

The test

The best way to find out whether acupuncture really works is for Andrew to volunteer himself to become a human pincushion. It's quite a nice coincidence, because Andrew's been sporting an injury lately, a sprain to his left knee while out running. It bothers him mainly on the hills and up and down stairs.

It's a bit of a sprain he'd normally treat with anti-inflammatory medication. Instead, Andrew's going to try acupuncture. But before he starts treatment, he'll need to find out how many stadium stairs he can run up before his dodgy knee tells him to stop.

"So I've had to pull up, it's only about 40 stairs that I got through before the pain got too much. Disappointing, I really want to get rid of it, so I'm interested to see, will acupuncture be the cure?" says Andrew.

Now to the pointy end of proceedings. Acupuncturist Stephen Janz has studied Eastern and Western medicine. He reckons acupuncture can heal all sorts of ailments, including Andrew's crook knee.

"What we're going to do is we're going to pop a few points in through your knee and a couple around it. And then we'll use just one or two other points just for the whole general body balance, help keep your body strong, if your body's well, it's easier for it to heal the damaged knee. I'm also going to pop a point in your ear as well which relates to the knee specifically," says Stephen.

Needles in the ear for the knee? What's that all about?

According to Eastern beliefs, the human body has 365 acupuncture points that connect to different organs and to energy channels.

In order to maintain overall health, these energy channels conduct the flow of an energy force called Chi. But if the flow of Chi becomes blocked at any point, the Chinese firmly believe it will cause an ailment to occur.

"It seems absurd, a point in your ear for your knee, so a big part of our role is educating people about relationships in the body. It's not always the case that it hurts here, so treat it here, and once someone's experienced it, you don't have to convince them of very much at all," explains Stephen.

Well, Andrew's happy to be convinced, if it works: "I don't love needles, but here goes ... starting, thanks Steve, with

that one in my ear ... as he inserts each needle, I can feel it go in, but it doesn't hurt one bit, amazing! It's kind of weird, feeling my whole knee actually buzzing, it's this sensation that my knee's vibrating for some odd reason."

In theory the needles are unblocking the energy flow around his knee — hence the buzz. This tells the acupuncturist that the point is activated and the energy is moving and they're going to get results.

"I'm going to let you rest for 15-20 minutes now. We find acupuncture works best when, once the pins are in, we let you have a little rest, let the energy move around in the body and do its work, okay?" says Stephen.

Andrew's just undergone his first session to help heal his knee injury but acupuncturist Stephen Janz says it's no miracle cure and that Andrew's going to need more sessions.

"It's going to take probably half a dozen treatments before you'll be happy to run on it again," says Stephen.

Five sessions to go ... In the meantime Andrew's going to dig a little deeper into this ancient Chinese practice.

"I want to know if acupuncture is just the placebo effect or if there's actually physiological changes going on in my brain. So I've come to the Wesley Hospital in Queensland to meet with a scientist who's on the cutting edge of this research."

Doctor Mark Strudwick is a researcher at the University of Queensland, and has been researching acupuncture, by using a Magnetic Resonance Imaging Machine, to map pain responses in the brain.

"I'm going to put you in this MRI machine here, two-and-a-half times stronger than the ones you find in X-ray departments. We're going to have a look at what happens in your brain when I put a needle in your hand," says Dr Strudwick to Andrew.

"I was up for the magnet, I wasn't up for the needle..." says Andrew.

But this isn't an acupuncture needle — it really hurts. Unfortunately, it needs to, because what Mark's going to do is map exactly where in Andrew's brain he feels pain, and how much.

"[There are] little hotspots in the brain that are actually part of the pain network called the insular. Now the insular is involved in our emotional response to pain and in our anticipation of pain," says Dr Strudwick.

When Dr Strudwick mapped the brains of patients undergoing acupuncture, he found their pain responses fell significantly.

"Now we have some hard evidence in the brain that the pain mechanism is being turned down by acupuncture."

So that could explain why acupuncture works?

"It can go towards explaining it, we have a lot more research to do yet," says Dr Strudwick.

But acupuncture isn't just about pain relief. Believers say it can heal the body, and Rosana Bouzas sure believes. At 34 she suffered early menopause, and was told she couldn't have another baby.

"Initially I thought I'd sought acupuncture out to help with the symptoms of menopause, and when I explained exactly to the acupuncturist "Hoc Ku Huynh" exactly what my situation was, he never promised me I'd get pregnant, but he did say that I was young, and healthy otherwise, and if we toned the body and responded to the treatment there was a good possibility I could get pregnant," says Rosana.

Rosana started a course of bi-weekly acupuncture treatments.

"After three months of treatment I was pregnant and I had a beautiful baby girl, Sophia. She was born on Christmas Day so we always say that she's our miracle baby. I think something as radical as getting pregnant when you're told your ovaries are not functioning and you're not going to get pregnant, I think there's more to it than just me believing the treatment would work."

Results

Andrew still doesn't know what to believe. But now that he's finished his six acupuncture sessions it's time to test the old knee again. Last time he only made it two thirds of the way up a giant staircase at the stadium. Now, he's running freely for the first time in two months.

Conclusion

"As a doctor, I had my doubts, but I just can't argue with this result ... that's a surprise as I didn't think I'd make it all the way to the top. Does acupuncture work? Well it seems to have worked for me, my dodgy knee's much better and I'm happy."

So does that mean acupuncture's going to work for you? Don't be afraid to try it.

Western medicine likes to define exactly how things work, and they've tried hard to come up with scientific explanations for the effectiveness of acupuncture as Western scientists don't subscribe to the Chinese acupuncture theory of energy flows. It hasn't been easy, but some researchers suggest the needles stimulate the release of endorphins, the body's natural painkillers. Others say it affects the release of natural relaxants like serotonin. While a third theory suggests it improves circulation by dilating blood vessels.

Fast facts

You might have your doubts about acupuncture, but there are plenty of people who trust it completely. In fact, it works so well for some, that in China it's been used in surgery, as an alternative to a general anaesthetic.