

What do you imagine when you think of the word acupuncture? It may not be something you've thought about, it may conjure up a picture of someone being impaled porcupine-style on a treatment table; it may evoke thoughts of relaxation ... or maybe torture!!

In a series of 4 articles, I want to give you a little insight into what it's all about ... and more importantly, how it can be used to help. This first article will look at acupuncture in general and how it can enhance fertility. In subsequent articles we will look at acupuncture in the first trimester of pregnancy, then the second trimester, then late pregnancy, delivery and the post-natal period.

The use of acupuncture in China extends back for over 2,000 years. In the UK, it has become increasingly popular in the last 30 years. Many of the philosophies and theories behind Chinese medicine (which includes acupuncture, as well as Chinese herbal medicine, dietary therapy and exercises such as Qi Gong) are so woven into the fabric of Chinese life that they are viewed by many Chinese, particularly those of the older generation, as second nature. But to us in the West, it can be baffling to come to terms with a way of medicine which talks about the balance of Yin and Yang, Qi (pronounced 'chee'), "channels" and of the energetics of different organs of the body .

I came to the practice of acupuncture via nursing ... so the move from orthodox Western medicine to traditional Chinese medicine was like learning a whole new language! However, the more I read and understood, and subsequently practised, the more I was, and continue to be, amazed at the subtle yet powerful effects this treatment can have on our bodies.

Fundamentally, acupuncture seeks to re-balance us: where we have pain, stress and disturbed body functions, Chinese medicine sees that our Qi (energy) is not flowing freely throughout the body via a network of channels, and the balance of Yin (nourishing, cooling and moistening) and Yang (active and warming) is disturbed. When you have an acupuncture consultation, you may be surprised at the type of questions we ask from finding out if you sigh a lot to whether you suffer from cold hands and feet. By asking questions, feeling your pulses in both wrists, looking at your tongue and skin colour we put together an internal 'weather pattern' which then directs treatment. It may sound strange to talk of a weather pattern, but Chinese medicine is heavily influenced by the changes which occur within the natural environment – again, the balances between cool, dark Yin and light, warm Yang.

The majority of people who have experienced acupuncture will tell you how very relaxing it is ... despite the fact that it involves the insertion of needles into specifically chosen locations! But this is the point (no pun intended) – these needles are so very thin (actually little more than a hair's breadth) that when they are inserted you should feel no more than the merest prick. And once they are in, you get a whole 20-25 minutes of deep relaxation where you may feel gentle tingling, warmth or heaviness as the needles get to work.

Acupuncture is used to address all manner of ailments from painful conditions such as sciatica, to tinnitus, to insomnia. It is also a valuable adjunct to supporting the treatment of fertility issues in both women and men. Latterly, scientific research into the effects of acupuncture within this sphere indicate that not only can acupuncture help to enhance fertility, thus increasing the chances of natural conception, but also, if it is necessary for a couple to undergo artificial conception, acupuncture helps to improve the chances of a successful outcome.

It is estimated that approximately 1 in 7 couples have difficulty conceiving*; any number of factors may be involved such as diminished sperm count and/or reduced sperm motility, female hormonal imbalances creating irregularities within the menstrual cycle and problems ovulating, or specific

conditions such as polycystic ovarian syndrome or endometriosis amongst others. Western medicine can be vital in running diagnostic testing such as blood analysis, scans etc., but more and more often we are seeing diagnoses of 'unexplained infertility' where, despite numerous tests, no specific abnormality can be detected. One of the many benefits of Chinese medicine is that through our diagnostic processes we see subtleties of imbalance such as Yin or Yang deficiencies, Blood stagnation, Phlegm and Damp accumulation – and treat accordingly, whether or not you have a medical diagnosis.

For example, Joanne, 33, a successful business woman had been trying to conceive for 3 years. Blood analysis, laparoscopic examination of her reproductive organs and her partner's semen analysis showed no abnormalities and a diagnosis of unexplained infertility was given. They were advised to consider IVF. Joanne came to see me ... very stressed, tearful and despairing of ever having a child. We chatted about her physical and emotional health, her lifestyle, her menstrual cycle – she had regular periods, often painful with clotted blood, and would feel very bloated, irritable, with tender breasts prior to her period. She was a busy lady, often eating her lunch on the way to meetings and regularly feeling exhausted by the weekend. On examination, her tongue looked normal apart from a red tip and her pulses felt taut (wiry in Chinese medicine!) My Chinese medicine diagnosis was Heart and Liver Qi stagnation: acupuncture was directed at correcting this stagnation and Joanne was advised to make time for meals, avoid cold food and drinks, avoid caffeine, go for gentle walks at the weekends and take a good quality fertility multivitamin/ mineral and essential fatty acid supplement. She came for weekly sessions; at her first period since the start of treatment she noticed that there were less clots and pain, she felt calmer and overall, her sleep was more restful. By her second and then third period, more improvements were noted. She didn't have a fourth period as she fell pregnant. She continued her treatment throughout pregnancy, and delivered a healthy boy last year. So much for "unexplained infertility"!

For some couples conception may be easy, but holding onto the pregnancy may prove problematic. It is the experience of many women that orthodox Western medicine has little to offer following a miscarriage ... until, that is, they have had three, then they will be referred for further investigation. In the meantime, the distress is ongoing. Chinese medicine, however, can offer comfort through a supportive relationship employing acupuncture and a physical re-balancing in line with its unique diagnostic methods. For us as practitioners of Chinese medicine, healthy fertility is just as much about nurturing a pregnancy to full term, and the delivery of a healthy baby as it is about being able to fall pregnant in the first place.

And in the next article ... acupuncture during the first trimester...

* *(Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority 2012)*