

History of Acupuncture

Acupuncture originated in China at least 2500 years ago and spread to neighbouring Asian countries including Japan, Vietnam, and Korea by about 500 CE, and finally to Europe in the 16th century. Acupuncture has been practised in France for at least 200 years. Early French practitioners included Sarlandière, probably the first individual to apply electric currents to the needles. He reported having success treating asthma, migraines, rheumatism and various forms of paralysis⁴.

In China, the practice of acupuncture can perhaps be traced as far back as the Stone Age, with the Bian shi, or sharpened stones. Stone acupuncture needles dating back to 3000 B.C. have been found by archeologists in Inner Mongolia.

Clearer evidence exists from the 1st millennium BCE, and archeological evidence has been identified with the period of the Han dynasty (202 BC–220 AD).

Recent examinations of Ötzi, a 5,000-year-old mummy found in the Alps, have identified over 50 tattoos on his body, some of which are located on acupuncture points that would today be used to treat certain ailments. Some scientists believe that this is evidence that practices similar to acupuncture were practiced elsewhere in Eurasia during the early Bronze Age.

According to an article published in The Lancet by Dorfer et al., "We hypothesised that there might have been a medical system similar to acupuncture (Chinese Zhenjiu: needling and burning) that was practiced in Central Europe 5,200 years ago...

A treatment modality similar to acupuncture thus appears to have been in use long before its previously known period of use in the medical tradition of ancient China. This raises the possibility of acupuncture having originated in the Eurasian continent at least 2000 years earlier than previously recognised."

Acupuncture's origins in China are uncertain. The earliest Chinese medical text that first describes acupuncture is the Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine (History of Acupuncture) Huangdi Neijing, which was compiled around 305–204 B.C. However, the Chinese medical texts (Ma-wang-tui graves, 68 BC) do not mention acupuncture. Some hieroglyphics have been found dating back to 1000 B.C. that may indicate an early use of acupuncture.

Bian stones, sharp pointed rocks used to treat diseases in ancient times, have also been discovered in ruins; some scholars believe that the bloodletting for which these stones were likely used presages certain acupuncture techniques. According to one legend, acupuncture started in China when some soldiers who were wounded by arrows in battle experienced a relief of pain in other parts of the body, and consequently people started experimenting with arrows (and later needles) as therapy.

Middle History

Acupuncture spread from China to Korea, Japan and Vietnam and elsewhere in East Asia. Portuguese missionaries in the 16th century were among the first to bring reports of acupuncture to the West.

Modern Era

In the 1970s, acupuncture became better known in the United States after an article appeared in The New York Times by James Reston, who underwent an emergency appendectomy while visiting China. While standard anesthesia was used for the actual surgery, Mr. Reston was treated with acupuncture for post-operative discomfort. The National Acupuncture Association (NAA), the first national association of acupuncture in the US, introduced acupuncture to the West through seminars and research presentations.

The NAA created and staffed the UCLA Acupuncture Pain clinic in 1972. This was the first legal clinic in a medical school setting in the US. The first acupuncture clinic in the United States is claimed to have been opened by Dr. Yao Wu Lee in Washington, D.C. on July 9, 1972. The Internal Revenue Service allowed acupuncture to be deducted as a medical expense beginning in 1973.