

The Art and Science of Acupuncture

Richard C. Niemtzow, MD, PhD, MPH

FREQUENTLY, I TREAT PATIENTS with acupuncture whose complaints are identical. These patients might even have the same pathology, sex, and age, and yet, similar therapies will fail in some cases. What is wrong with the science? This problem occurs not only with patients who are receiving acupuncture but also with other medical specialty treatments. I have observed failures in my previous practice as a radiation oncologist. Patients who appeared almost identical and matched for tumor type, sex, age, etc., responded differently to the same cancer therapy. This is not unusual in medicine. Research projects should investigate more about why some therapies fail for some patients and why others do well with the exact therapies. However, research might not always help when one is faced with a nonresponder in a busy clinic.

So, what are the solutions? We may investigate data from randomized controlled clinical trials to help make better clinical decisions. And, if used wisely in our practices, this information is extremely helpful. Nevertheless, let's keep in mind that acupuncture, besides being a science, is an art. Frequently, we make clinical decisions that are not necessarily based on clinical trials, but rather on our own experiences that have proved beneficial for our patients. Can we capitalize on these experiences? Please read on.

Several colleagues asked if I might put on another international auriculotherapy symposium similar to the one I did in 2014, on The Johns Hopkins Campus in Rockville, MD. For that event, 200 people attended from the United States, South America, China, Australia, and Europe. It was successful and, in addition, we also had two special issues of *Medical Acupuncture* devoted to this it. As I contemplate the next symposium, I realize that evidence-based presentations are a must. However, for the workshops, I would like to include the master teachers/mentors, that we sought out when help and guidance were desperately needed. I'll give you an

example from my own experiences. William Craig, MD, helped me with tough cases when I did not know where to begin. His practical clinical experience with electroacupuncture is known to many acupuncturists. I will always remember his encouraging words when I wondered if I could help with difficult patients I was confronted with. He would say: "Of course you can!" Jim Shore, PhD, was another mentor I could call on any time, and his calming voice always steadied my confused feelings. His auriculotherapy skills remain amazing to this day. My mentors became close friends and colleagues. How many of us have met wonderful mentors during our acupuncture careers?

Now let me get on with my plan: If I have another 3-day symposium, the theme would be Acupuncture, Auriculotherapy, and Pregnancy: Best Practices of the Art. Day 1 would include presentations of peer-reviewed articles, and the remaining 2 days would be dedicated to workshops with acupuncture techniques taught by those master teachers/mentors. What—and who—do you all recommend? I would like to hear suggestions and advice from the readership. Now, why pregnancy? Well, a lot of us shy away from treating pregnant patients with acupuncture. This is a challenging area, but it is safer to treat pregnant females than we previously thought.

Planning a symposium is very complicated and risky. One is never sure if the attendance will be great and whether enough funds will be available to pay the expenses. It takes months of careful planning and it never seems that everything will be ready. There is a lot of friction to overcome. One certainly has moments of doubt and even fear. Yet, in the back of my mind I hear my mentor say: "Of course you can!"

—Richard C. Niemtzow, MD, PhD, MPH

The opinions and assertions contained herein are the private views of the author and are not to be construed as official or as reflecting the views of the United States Air Force Medical Corps, the Air Force at large, or the Department of Defense. The author indicates that he does not have any conflicts of interest.