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Integration of East-West Medicine for Pain Management in Frail Elderly

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Numerous studies have shown acupuncture to be effective in treatment of chronic pain syndrome. However, studies on treating frail elderly patients with acupuncture are lacking. The patient population at On Lok is a unique cohort to study because of age (average 82 years old), the presence of multiple medical problems (average 8 medical problems) in each patient, the prevalent use of multiple medications, and the chronic nature of pain conditions. Acupuncture is theoretically a better choice to manage chronic pain problems in the frail elderly, because the incidence of adverse effects is substantially lower with acupuncture than with the non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), and there are fewer drug interactions.

Since September, 1999, On Lok SeniorHealth has provided on-site acupuncture services to those enrolled patients who have chronic pain syndromes. In our initial 3 month experience, a total 17 patients received acupuncture treatment in addition to their usual care with Western treatment modalities. Among these 17 patients, the average age was 80. The diagnoses treated included degenerative joint disease (7), post CVA muscular pain (5), post herpetic neuralgia (2), pain from musculo-skeletal deformities (2), and severe chronic muscle spasm (1). Approximately 75% of the patients felt their pain condition improved after the 4-6 treatments (one treatment per week). A combination of electro-acupuncture, cupping and heat therapy offered the best relaxation and pain relief for most of the patients. Patients with knee joint pain had the best response to treatment, partially due to the easy access of the acupoints around the knee joints and the lower extremities. We found that frail elderly patients need longer initial treatments before they start to experience benefit from the treatments. This delay in response among frail elderly patients may be due to the lack of Qi energy and general kidney deficiency, as defined by Traditional Chinese Medicine. Among the 13 pts. who reported improvement in their pain condition, 5 were on NSAID's prior to acupuncture treatments. Following the treatments, 5 had adequate pain relief on acetaminophen alone. We will continue to evaluate the data as the acupuncture clinic serves more patients at On Lok.