

Acupuncture: between tradition and contemporary

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Opinion

Acupuncture was born in ancient China and origins get lost in time, with most of the archaeological records putting it near the beginning of Christian era.¹

Its excellent results brought it to West, continuously, in the middle of 20th century and call the attention of medical doctors and scientists. At first, the one who was interested in this medical practice had to dive into the ancient knowledge. Slowly, this vast wisdom was interpreted in a more familiar language for the West.

Entering an increasingly Cartesian world, practitioners were required to demonstrate its scientific validity. The first experiments aimed, in vain, to validate traditional knowledge such as the existence of acupuncture points and channels.

At same time, pain researchers, led by Melzack and Wall² and mainly Han³ increasingly demonstrated the physical and biochemical potential of acupuncture, through the demonstration of neural action and the release of endogenous opioids.

Still others, seeing good results in musculoskeletal pathologies, correlated channels and points with fascial structures.⁴

In recent years, researches cast doubt on the specificity of points, despite demonstrating the effectiveness of acupuncture. These researches, however, had a “schizophrenic” character, as at the same time as they used the best scientific methods they also used the traditional model of channels and points that at the time were already contested.⁵

These works were important because it was realized that placebo or sham was extremely hard to perform.⁶ These results led to the conclusion that several – if not all – sites on the human body could elicit therapeutic responses. Even more, they could provoke central-level responses that stimulate homeostasis but at same time denying many of the traditional proposals.

These discoveries have split the acupuncture community virtually everywhere it is practiced. On the one hand, traditional practitioners defending ancient knowledge, often with fundamentalist airs. On the other hand, practitioners of a more contemporary perspective have been criticizing and sometimes completely rejecting everything that comes from the past.

Nothing more wrong than this dichotomy. Both knowledge's, the ancient and the contemporary, are not absolute and provides excellent ways to understand and practice acupuncture. From the tradition we have the empirical - the first rational thought -, the understanding of holism, the concept of remote stimulus, one of the first notions of nervous system, and finally, the invention of tools.

From the nowadays knowledge, we import the scientific method, the modern diagnostic, the deep anatomy, the statistics, and the criticism by peer review. As a weak side we have some anachronistic postulates by the tradition and a horrible tendency by contemporary knowledge to provoke reductionism. Both knowledges should walk together. Not to despise the ancient wisdom of tradition, but also not to accept it passively. Seek to integrate this knowledge with

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contemporary bioscience⁷ or using the words of a Brazilian indigenous leader we should go forward into an ancestral future.⁸

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