



An Evaluation of an Acupuncture Program for Drug Treatment in San Diego County

by Jack Miller

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A pilot study was recently conducted by the City of San Diego to determine whether or not acupuncture was helpful in curbing the drug addictions of patients with treatment and/or motivated these parolees to search for a higher quality of life without drugs. The hope was to find if acupuncture will ease the patients through the initial stages of Post Acute Withdrawal Syndrome (the emotional, psychological, and physical symptoms of ridding the body of the substance) and to keep them in treatment longer. The Solutions program began acupuncture treatments on September 1, 1993 and the results are as follows:

The focus of this research was to examine the use of acupuncture in an outpatient program for parolees with drug problems. The outpatient program, funded by the San Diego County Alcohol and Drug Services and operated by the Community Connection Resource Center receives referrals from the Parolee Partnership Program (PPP). The Pacific College of Oriental Medicine supplies a licensed acupuncturist and required supplies through an agreement with Community Connection. The goal of Community Connection's acupuncture program is to retain outpatient parolee clients in treatment longer than drug-addicted parolees who do not receive acupuncture. The research procedures included the case tracking of 52 acupuncture clients and a comparison group of 64 individuals in treatment without acupuncture. Information was compiled on the socio-demographic features of the two groups: type, level, and history of drug use, and arrests, charges filed, and dispositions during the time in the program. Study results indicate that acupuncture may have an influence on the length of time in treatment and reduce or eliminate drug use. This research may be helpful to treatment providers and policymakers in determining how best to allocate resources toward populations in treatment and what results can be reasonably expected by using acupuncture. The research suggests area for future study, such as drug abuse, including criminal behavior pre- and post- treatment, and cost of treatment compared to the benefits of treatment.

The Test Groups:

Two groups were observed: one group received acupuncture treatment and the other group did not, serving as a comparison group.

All clients were adult parolees and more than 80 percent were male. Both test groups were

primarily comprised of Caucasians and African-Americans.

Nearly half (46 percent) of both groups were between the ages of 31 and 40 years, and roughly a quarter were in the age category of 26 and 30.

2 percent of each group had a college degree while 56 percent of the acupuncture clients had graduated high school, compared to 47 percent of the comparison group. Over one quarter (27 percent) of the acupuncture clients did not graduate high school compared to 41 percent of the comparison group.

Heroin was cited most frequently as the primary drug problem by clients in both groups. Over a third (36 percent) of the comparison group reported cocaine compared to less than a quarter (23 percent) of the acupuncture group. Fifty-six percent (56 percent) of the acupuncture clients and 45 percent of the comparison group stated that their primary route of drug administration was injection.

Over sixty percent (69 percent for the acupuncture clients and 61 percent for the comparison group) reported no use of their primary drug in the 30 days prior to treatment admission.

Findings:

Arrests during the program were few for both groups. Only four acupuncture clients were rearrested during their time in treatment; the comparison group had five people rearrested.

Acupuncture clients stayed in treatment nearly twice as long as the comparison group (an average of 93 days for the acupuncture clients compared to an average of 48 days for the comparison group.) In addition, the acupuncture clients received more individual counseling, group counseling, ancillary services, and employment referrals than the comparison clients.

The average number of acupuncture treatments received per client was ten.

The average time spent in the program for successful acupuncture clients was almost double the average time for successful comparison clients (113 days versus 70 days, respectively).

90 percent of the acupuncture clients, compared to 69 percent of the comparison group, reported no drug use since the beginning of the treatment program.

33 percent of the acupuncture clients were employed in the beginning of treatment, and by the end of treatment, 65 percent were employed. While the comparison group also show an increase in employment upon program completion, the total number of comparison clients employed upon exit was less (43 percent).

Interpretations:

The entire outpatient program lasts 180 days, but, in the past, most people only attended

between 30 and 60 days. Acupuncture clients stayed in treatment nearly twice the amount of the comparison group (an average of 93 days for the acupuncture clients and average of 48 days for the comparison group). Therefore, acupuncture clients had greater opportunity to receive additional individual counseling, group counseling, and ancillary services.

The average number of acupuncture treatments that each clients received was ten. Based on an average of three months in treatment, each participant received almost one acupuncture treatment per week. The goal of the acupuncture component of Solutions/Soluciones program was to keep parolees in treatment longer so they could benefit from the services provided. As noted above, the acupuncture clients did spend more time in treatment and, although self-reported, 90 percent claim they did not use drugs during their treatment.

Some of the factors that impede treatment efforts were that many of the parolees who entered the Solutions/Soluciones program either did not volunteer to receive acupuncture treatment or did not complete the treatment program. According to the Solutions/Soluciones staff, the reactions to treatment and the reservations toward participating included fear of needles, fear of a new dependence on the acupuncture, headaches or fatigue resulting from treatment, or no positive experiences as a result of acupuncture (i.e., relaxed, attentive at group therapy, less stressed, etc.).

It is important to note that the majority of individuals in either group did not stay in treatment for the recommended (180 days) which is an issue that the service provider may wish to address along with the fact that Solutions/Soluciones' clients did not receive as many acupuncture treatments as specified in the program scope of work.

For further information:

The results of this pilot study have been so well received by the San Diego substance abuse treatment community that plans are currently underway for inclusion of acupuncture treatment at San Diego's Las Colinas Women's Detention Facility and the Otay Mesa Jail. Acupuncturists interested in working in these facilities should send their resume to Pacific College, attention **Jack Miller**.