



## Enlighten Me: Growing acceptance of acupuncture

By April Hall

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The idea of calling acupuncture “relaxing” may be hard to believe, but even people who describe themselves as “needle-phobic” sometimes face their fears if it will help them with problems that seem to have no other solution. And now acupuncturists may see a surge in patients as the new federal health care law is expected to cover alternative treatments.

Stacey Blackwell is a self-described needle-phobe. When she battled infertility and Polycystic Ovary Syndrome, the Middletown woman consulted specialists. She went through regimented cycles of pharmaceutical use to address her issues. She did everything.

People suggested she try acupuncture, but she was hesitant because of her fear of needles. A massage therapist at a chiropractor’s office in Newark, Blackwell talked to Brian Allen about acupuncture. Allen was already working with Blackwell using Tuina (pronounced tweena), Oriental bodywork therapy sometimes considered a bridge between massages and acupuncture.

Allen administered a needle in Blackwell’s skin so she could feel the sensation for herself. She decided her desire for a baby was stronger than her fear of needles and embarked on two years of treatments.

Today, sitting in the waiting room of the chiropractor’s office where she and Allen both work, with 17-month-old Gwendolyn on her lap, Blackwell considers hers a success story for acupuncture. She said the weekly needling helped alleviate the side effects of traditional medical treatment for infertility and she conceived her baby girl.

She continued acupuncture for “basic pregnancy support,” she said. “Because when you deal with infertility you definitely get a little paranoid about issues during pregnancy, about something going wrong.”

Even two years later, though, Blackwell said she keeps her eyes closed while Allen administers the needles.

Allen has been practicing acupuncture for nine years. He is certified by the National Certification Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine (NCCAOM) which encompasses acupuncture, Chinese Herbology and Asian Bodywork Therapy.

Delaware licensed the practice of acupuncture in the state in 2008 and requires certification by the NCCAOM, though people practicing in good standing at that time were grandfathered in without the

### Audio



Delaware Public Media's Tom Byrne and contributor April Hall discuss the growing acceptance of acupuncture.

### Video



Delaware Public Media visits a local acupuncture session

certification. Although a majority of the 13 certified acupuncturists in the state are in New Castle County, they are also in Milton, Dover and Rehoboth.

Allen has seen patients at Spinal Specialists of Delaware's office in Newark for about two and a half years. Dr. Deana Burd, who owns the practice, said she wants a full-service office with complementary care including massage, rehab services, a nutritionist and alternative therapies. Adding Oriental medicine seemed a natural fit and Allen came highly recommended.

"It's always surprising to get referrals from doctors," Allen said. "Usually, people find my website or hear about me through word of mouth. He recommended that if people are interested in acupuncture or are looking for a practitioner, they should visit [nccaom.org](http://nccaom.org) to find certified acupuncturists.

"There's an over association of acupuncture to pain complaints." He figured 70 percent of his clients have pain issues, the other 30 percent are functional complaints, ranging from insomnia to migraines to anxiety.

But Allen says that only scrapes the surface of what acupuncture can treat.

### ***Acupuncture and Qi***

To explain how acupuncture works in Western medical terms is impossible, Allen said. First of all, it is more about energy than it is about physicality. Harmonious flow of qi (pronounced chee), or energy, is at the root of the practice. When the qi is disharmonious, the body reacts.

The reaction may be insomnia or migraines or sciatica or anxiety or infertility. All of these can be treated by improving the flow of qi. The acupuncture points on the body are where an acupuncturist can access the pathways of qi.

"Clearly (acupuncture) is doing something quite different in all of those cases," Allen said of the conditions his practice can treat. But at the root is the flow of energy.

When he places the needles in Blackwell to supplement her energy flow, he starts with four "gates," one point in each hand and one in each foot. A finger on her right hand jumps a little as Allen places the needle.

"Did you feel that?" Allen asked. Blackwell said she did. Allen said he feels something like feedback through the needle when he hits the channel qi. He compares it to trying to put two repelling magnets together.

The needles Allen used on Blackwell were single use, sterile, stainless steel needles, .25 mm thick. He said 10-20 of those acupuncture needles can fit inside a hypodermic needle. A hypodermic needle, meant to administer medication or draw blood, cuts the skin and punctures underneath the skin which is totally different from what acupuncture needles do.

Because the steel needles are thin, they give the illusion of sharpness, he said. They don't cut; they push through the skin and nudge nerves and blood vessels out of the way, when the needle is in the hand of a trained practitioner.

"First the needle gets through the skin and that generally feels like a small pinch. Then the needle is adjusted to the depth and the angle where it needs to be just depending on where I'm needling and what it is I'm trying to do," Allen said.

"Occasionally, there's a drop or two of blood, that's rare. Or a bruise – that's even more rare."

Tre Sullivan lives in Wilmington. After years of tennis and biking and what she describes as “lifting things incorrectly all of the time,” she had serious wrist pain.

After someone suggested she try acupuncture she went to visit Xiaoyan Gong in Wilmington, also a NCCAOM-certified acupuncturist.

“I looked like a voodoo doll,” Sullivan said. “But I felt a significant difference in my wrist after two visits.” She completed a 10-visit treatment that also helped with neck pain and said she wouldn’t hesitate to return if she had more pain.

As a retired pharmaceutical representative, Sullivan said she saw a lot of traditional medicine in her career and now looks for the most natural non-invasive treatments possible when she faces health challenges.

“I don’t want surgery. I’ll do whatever I have to avoid surgery,” she said. “And I’m not afraid of needles. I give blood all of the time, so I was completely open to it.”

### ***The Dollars and Cents of Oriental Medicine***

The Affordable Care Act is expected to cover alternative treatments like acupuncture. Court decisions have already reinforced the idea of the “non-discrimination” of care coverage, but consumers need to examine their insurance policies to see what is covered and at what level.

When Blackwell was trying to conceive and continued with acupuncture treatments through her pregnancy, she paid out of pocket. While it would have been nice if the needling was covered by insurance, she said she didn’t expect it to be and it wasn’t terribly expensive. “It was certainly cheaper than the other treatments,” she said.

Sullivan said she expected to pay about \$1,000 for her acupuncture treatments, that was her budget. But, just for kicks, she contacted her insurance provider and learned it was covered at 70 percent, once her deductible was met. “I almost passed out,” she laughed.

An estimated 3.1 million U.S. adults and 150,000 children used acupuncture in 2006, according to the most recent National Health Interview Survey (NHIS) available. Between the 2002 and 2007 NHIS, acupuncture use among adults increased by approximately 1 million people. Credit for that increase was given to state licensing laws and insurance coverage.

“The reality is that acupuncture is a lot less expensive than traditional Western medical treatments,” Allen said. “It can save insurance companies a lot more than it costs.”