

Acupuncture is best remedy for back pain

ACUPUNCTURE is more effective at relieving some types of pain than conventional Western treatments, scientists claim today.

The ancient oriental remedy relieved discomfort by up to 15 per cent more than standard NHS techniques, according to a major study.

Patients with lower back pain reported greater pain relief after being treated with acupuncture than those who had been offered standard treatment. And the improvements increased further over time.

A separate investigation found that an acupuncture course offered good enough value for money to be prescribed on the NHS.

The study was welcomed as a "significant step forward" by alternative health practitioners, who predicted increased use of the treatment in NHS hospitals.

Scoring

But sceptics questioned the significance of the research.

The study, led by Dr Hugh MacPherson of York University's department of health sciences, examined 241 patients suffering from persistent non-specific lower back pain.

Half were given acupuncture therapy, while the other half received standard NHS treatment.

The study, published today in the British Medical Journal, found that after a year, patients in the acupuncture group were marginally less in pain than those receiving conventional care.

The researchers used a "pain scoring" measurement known as SF-36 to assess how much pain the patients were in. A difference of more than five would be significant, they said.

After a year, the difference between the two groups was 5.6, but after two years the difference was eight points, enough to convince the researchers that they had hit on a real discovery.

The acupuncture patients were also less likely to need to use further medication and more likely to report their pain having cleared up entirely, it found. Dr MacPherson said: "Until

By **Tom Wainwright**

now the evidence base for acupuncture has been weak because no drug company has wanted to spend money on the research. No-one has previously done a trial like this in primary care.

"What it shows is that there is something fundamentally different between the effects of acupuncture and conventional treatment.

"The difference between patients' pain grew over time, which is the opposite of what one would normally expect with a drug trial, where the effects wear off over time."

Mike O'Farrell, chief executive of the British Acupuncture Council, added: "This is a significant step forward. We are delighted to see yet another example of how acupuncture can help patients.

"It is tremendous that the BMJ feels confident enough to publish research on alternative therapy in this way."

But not everyone was impressed. Prof David Colquhoun, of University College London's pharmacology department, admitted that it was "not a bad study" but dismissed acupuncture's principles as "total gibberish".

He said: "The effect that this study shows is a very small one, which is really hardly worth the money and time. There is a small difference, but by God it's marginal."

And he said that the improvement could be simply due to a placebo effect - a trick of the mind.

In a separate paper the same researchers found that acupuncture offered comparable value for money to standard NHS treatment.

The costs over two years were £345 per person for standard care and £460 for the acupuncture group.

A Department of Health spokeswoman said: "Decisions on the commissioning of alternative therapies, including acupuncture, on the NHS are a matter for primary care trusts and local NHS service providers.

"The Government considers that decision-making on individuals' clinical interventions, whether conventional, complementary or alternative treatments, is a local matter."