

Extent of acupuncture practice for infertility in the United Kingdom: experiences and perceptions of the practitioners

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Objective: To investigate acupuncture practitioners' experience and perceptions of supporting patients presenting with fertility issues.

Design: Questionnaire survey.

Setting: British Acupuncture Council.

Patient(s): British Acupuncture Council acupuncture practitioners.

Intervention(s): Questionnaire designed for the study, by post and online.

Main Outcome Measure(s): Questions on education and training, size and nature of practice, liaison with conventional care, and perceptions about use of acupuncture for fertility issues.

Result(s): Questionnaires were sent to 2,580 practitioners. Of 861 responses, 15% of practitioners supporting fertility issues said this constituted a large proportion of their case load. Eighty percent of practitioners reported most fertility work was related to assisted conception. More than 60% had specialist training. Practitioners' perceived benefits included stress reduction, relaxation, regulation of menstrual cycle, and emotional support. Emotional burden on both patients and practitioners was recognized and the limits of therapy. Point-specific acupuncture protocols were common (70%). Thirteen percent reported problems working with physicians. Use of acupuncture for male fertility issues was uncommon.

Conclusion(s): A minority of acupuncturists have become specialists in supporting fertility issues. The use of an acupuncture protocol is common but does not conform to traditional acupuncture as it is taught and practiced for other conditions. (Fertil Steril® 2010;94:2569–73. ©2010 by American Society for Reproductive Medicine.)

Key Words: Acupuncture, practitioners, patient expectations, fertility, survey

Acupuncture is used commonly in China to treat male and female fertility and gynecologic conditions (1). In Western countries gynecologic and andrologic complaints are less prominent in acupuncture patient profiles compared with musculoskeletal pain (2). This changed after a publication demonstrating that Chinese acupuncture added to IVF or intracytoplasmic sperm injection significantly improved pregnancy rates (3).

Meta-analysis of seven clinical trials (published since 2002) on acupuncture used to support IVF (N = 1,366) suggested improved rates of pregnancy (4). Acupuncture given within 1 day of ET was compared with either sham acupuncture or no additional treatment. Women having acupuncture were 91% more likely to have a live birth. The systematic review of Cheong et al. (5) determined that acupuncture (on the day of ET) may be beneficial for live birth rate (odds ratio 1.89) whereas El-Toukhy et al. (6) concluded that

there was insufficient evidence. A subsequent study reported that sham outperformed *verum*, but the sham itself appeared to be an active intervention (7).

Observational studies in China indicated that acupuncture may help to normalize menstrual cycles and stimulate ovulation (8–15). Studies on polycystic ovary syndrome, amenorrhea, and oligomenorrhea have demonstrated positive effects (16). Changes in hormone profiles and suggested physiologic mechanisms have been reported (10, 15–19).

There are few controlled trials of acupuncture to improve natural fertility. Gerhard and Postneek (20) found similar pregnancy rates, but significantly fewer side effects, for acupuncture compared with best orthodox treatment. Acupuncture has delivered significantly better pregnancy outcomes than Western drugs in Chinese studies (21–24).

Acupuncture research on male factor infertility has focused almost entirely on sperm abnormalities. Improvements in sperm quality have been noted in several small controlled trials (25–27). Research suggests that acupuncture increases sperm output where scrotal temperatures are high and genital tracts inflamed (28). Patient (29, 30) and practitioner (30) experiences of acupuncture fertility treatment were positive in two small studies.

The British Acupuncture Council decided to fund this research given the increasing demand for acupuncture treatment for fertility-related issues (31), evidence of increasing acupuncturists'

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specialization in gynecology and obstetrics, and results from efficacy studies. The British Acupuncture Council is a professional register of United Kingdom traditional acupuncturists. Entry to the register is determined by completion of a course of study approved by an independent body (the British Acupuncture Accreditation Board). The aim of this study was to explore acupuncturists' experience of treating fertility and their related issues within clinical practice.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

With British Acupuncture Council approval, all its members ($N = 2,580$) were asked to complete a questionnaire on their education and training, size and nature of practice, liaison with conventional care, and perceptions about acupuncture use for fertility issues. Open questions allowed the collection of qualitative data. The questionnaire was inserted into the June 2007 edition of *The Acupuncturist* (a journal sent to all members). The pack contained a prepaid envelope. Instructions also were provided for those members who wished to complete the survey online using SurveyMonkey, an electronic data collection tool. All postal questionnaire replies were added to the database. Reminders were sent in August 2007 and October 2007. The survey closed at the end of December 2007.

Quantitative data were analyzed with use of SPSS software (SPSS, Inc., Chicago, IL). Univariate descriptive statistics were calculated for interval/ratio variables and frequencies and percentages for categorical data. The effects of other variables on the numbers of new fertility patients recruited in the previous year were examined with use of bivariate analysis. Spearman correlation coefficients were calculated for interval/ratio variables and Student's t test or a one-way analysis of variance for categorical variables. The diverse qualitative data obtained from practitioners' responses to 11 questions were content analyzed and grouped into themes for further analysis. Atlas.ti software (Atlas.ti Scientific Software Development GmbH, Germany) was used to facilitate labeling and retrieval of quotes.

RESULTS

Respondents' Characteristics

A total of 861 acupuncturists replied, a 33% response rate. Of the respondents, 73% were female with an average of 11 years in practice. The mean number of patients per week for any condition was 20.5, but 85% of practitioners saw between one and 20 patients per week. Various different traditional styles of acupuncture were represented: traditional Chinese medicine and five element predominated; 32% also prescribed herbs.

Size and Nature of Fertility-related Practice

The mean numbers of new infertility patients per practitioner per year were 15 women and 2 men (median values 6 and 0, respectively). Distributions were highly skewed: 17 practitioners (2.0%) treated ≥ 100 new infertility patients per year; 3 practitioners saw in excess of 750. For 71% of respondents, fertility patients constituted a small or insignificant part of their practice, for 15% a large proportion or most of their practice.

Traditional Chinese medicine-style practitioners saw significantly ($P=.033$) larger numbers of female fertility patients than practitioners using other acupuncture styles; there was no such difference for male patients. There were no significant differences in numbers of fertility patients (male or female) in respect to practitioner gender or experience or practice location.

Common symptoms and medical conditions related to infertility were irregular cycles, polycystic ovaries, and endometriosis (for women) and abnormal sperm (for men). Medically unexplained infertility was high for both sexes. Practitioners believed acupuncture was most suitable for problematic menstrual cycles (25.1%), unexplained infertility (21.2%), stress (16.2%), and IVF (15.4%), but 26.4% thought it was suitable for most fertility issues. Nearly

TABLE 1

Practitioner-reported perceived advantages and benefits of using acupuncture for fertility issues.

Advantages and benefits	No. (%) of responses
Stress reduction/relaxation	127 (18.6)
Holistic approach	116 (17.0)
Effectiveness	80 (11.7)
Regulation of menstrual cycle	72 (10.5)
Emotional/spiritual support	60 (8.8)
Conventional side effects reduced/less invasive	56 (8.2)
Patient empowerment and education	56 (8.2)
Works alongside conventional medicine	38 (5.6)
Avoidance of conventional medicine	17 (2.5)
Cost (cheaper than IVF)	10 (1.5)

Bovey. Acupuncture and fertility. Fertil Steril 2010.

80% of practitioners reported that a substantial proportion of their fertility work was related to assisted conception. A set protocol with predetermined points around the time period of egg collection and/or ET was used, at least in part, by 70% (419/596). The Paulus protocol was most popular (3).

Perceived Advantages and Benefits of Using Acupuncture for Fertility Problems

Content analysis of qualitative responses on the benefits and advantages of using acupuncture for fertility issues highlighted various main themes (Table 1). A total of 683 (79%) practitioners answered this question, some providing more than one answer.

Stress and relaxation Nearly a fifth of practitioners identified reduced stress levels and improved relaxation as benefits of acupuncture. Quotations from the respondents: "Acupuncture by its very nature will help patients to relax and stabilize their emotional state—which can be an underlying cause in fertility." "Western fertility treatment is a stressful period, which may reduce the likelihood of conception. Acupuncture can help to manage the anxiety, get the body and mind more receptive to conception."

Holistic The holistic nature of the approach was emphasized by 17% of respondents, reporting physical, mental, and emotional aspects, treating underlying causes, balancing energy, and improving general health and fertility: "A therapeutic relationship in the context of fertility and a holistic approach. It [fertility] is an area where most biomedical care is very production line oriented, and not attuned to any nuance in what couples might want help with." "[Acupuncture] can be used as a natural method of increasing fertility through strengthening meridian and energy movement, balancing the whole body before pregnancy."

Acupuncture perceived as effective For 12% of practitioners, acupuncture's advantage was its effectiveness for fertility, particularly "unexplained" fertility, and maximizing IVF success.

Menstrual regulation Acupuncture was seen as effective for menstrual cycle/hormonal regulation: "Increase follicle stimulation/ovulation, regulate cycle, reduce dysmenorrhoea, promote period." "Return to healthier uterus/ovary/cycle and support better hormonal balance."

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