

The Needle and the Lancet: Acupuncture in Britain, 1683-2000

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Summary

Although commonly regarded as a late twentieth century phenomenon, acupuncture use in Britain has a surprisingly long history, beginning with its seventeenth century transmission from China and Japan. Acupuncture was in use in the great hospitals of Paris before a second stage of transmission and translation brought it to nineteenth century Britain. Acupuncture's first wave of popularity and its results in British medical practice can be examined through examples drawn from the *Lancet*, the *BMJ* and other medical periodicals. This historical transmission of acupuncture to the UK can be fruitfully compared to its modern analogue, and historical patterns of acupuncture use can be compared with those displayed in contemporary Britain.

Keywords

Acupuncture, history, cross-cultural, transmission of knowledge, expertise.

Introduction

In a club room in Westminster, about a mile away from the great teaching hospitals of central London, the London Medical Society – a body of vaguely reform-minded doctors, gentlemen all – was settling into post-prandial discussion over a few decanters of port. As a desultory conversation about rheumatism and its intractability faltered, a physician brought up the recent fad for acupuncture. He suggested that the technique was losing its effect as it lost its novelty. Another member, a surgeon by the name of Dendy,

responded agreeably that indeed, 'of late success does not seem to have attended it'. But Dendy had a more cheerful tale to tell – a story of an Earl, a surgeon and a horse named Acupuncture. Dendy told his colleagues that he had used acupuncture for some years and had heard from other users as well:

Amongst the cures [acupuncture] produced, was one which came within my knowledge, where it benefited both patient and practitioner in a very agreeable manner. The Earl of Egremont was a martyr to rheumatism, and some years since, after having been treated by every medical man of note in London, without obtaining relief, he retired to his seat at Petworth, in despair. A friend of mine, who resided in Sussex at that time, happened to get an early copy of Mr. Churchill's little work on acupuncture, and tried the remedy therein advocated with perfect success on an old woman who was a protégé of Lady Burrell, the daughter-in-law of the Earl. Her ladyship heard of the cure, and told the Earl what had been done; the result was, that the surgeon was sent for forthwith to try the new process on the peer, into whose tormented person he accordingly introduced two needles.... The effect was, that the Earl, who had obtained no sleep for the past fortnight, that night slept for seven or eight hours. Filled with joy, he gave the fortunate practitioner a check for a large sum, sent him home with post horses, and that day bestowed on one of his favourite racers the name of 'Acupuncture'. 'The event', Dendy concluded, 'made my friend's fortune.'¹