

TITLE: Acupuncture as a strategy for HIV symptom relief and improved quality of life in rural Thailand

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ISSUES:

Acupuncture is a potentially useful treatment for decreasing symptoms of chronic HIV infection, reducing side effects of antiretroviral (ARV) medication and improving quality of life (QoL) among people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) in resource-poor settings.

DESCRIPTION:

The Mae On Project began in April 2004 with three objectives:

1. To develop a pilot program to train medical staff in acupuncture as adjunctive treatment for PLWHA at Mae On Hospital in northern Thailand.
2. To create a hospital clinic to provide acupuncture for PLWHA.
3. To conduct a pilot study investigating the efficacy of acupuncture in this context

Two Thai nurses received 110 hours of didactic acupuncture training over 4.5 months. Clinical training consisted of treating PLWHA with weekly acupuncture over 6 months. The pilot study was a non-randomized, single-arm study. Among 32 PLWHA who attended acupuncture, only 27 with stable medication use and no significant morbidities were enrolled. All participants gave informed consent; completed pre- and post-acupuncture Quality of Life and Memorial Symptom Assessment Scale (MSAS) questionnaires; and participated in semi-structured interviews.

LESSONS LEARNED:

At six months, participants reported a decrease in pain ($p=0.03$) using the MSAS. No changes were reported in the quality of life questionnaire. However, semi-structured interview data suggested 96% of participants experienced symptom relief, and 89% experienced an improvement in sense of wellness and emotional well-being. More significantly, 48% reported increased ability to work, thus decreasing financial concerns and related stress.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

This project demonstrates the feasibility of establishing a hospital-based acupuncture clinic in a rural setting for PLWHA. This low-cost intervention program was established in less than 12 months, using local nursing staff. Evaluative data suggest acupuncture may be associated with improved physical symptoms and QoL; a larger study is now being planned to elicit more sophisticated data regarding the effects of acupuncture in PLWHA.