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One woman's life had been crippled by osteoarthritis until she found relief in Chinese medicine, says David Mattin Christmas 2005 wasn't much fun for 73-year-old Maureen Vine. She had long been a sufferer from chronic osteoarthritis in her knees, hips and back and she was now afflicted by an arthritic right ankle, which left her in pain and limping. "My youngest grandchild was 4 years old and he couldn't understand why I wouldn't play with him on the floor on Christmas Day," Vine recalls. "It was just too painful. The terrible pain in my ankle spread to the sole of my foot, and I could hardly walk."

Vine had suffered from osteoarthritis -in which wear and tear causes joint stiffness and pain -in the back, hips, and knees for 30 years, and had tried occasional physiotherapy, which had brought a little relief. But a stomach condition meant that she had to avoid anti-inflammatory medication or strong painkillers. In November 2005 her right ankle began showing signs that it, too, had become arthritic and by the new year, Vine was at her GP in Hackney, East London. "She prescribed some painkillers that I can tolerate called Co-dydramol," Vine says. "I was taking eight a day, but they barely took the edge off the pain. I usually enjoy a daily walk around the park, but now I was housebound. Then I remembered that my son had recently tried acupuncture for his arthritic shoulder and said that it had worked wonders. Although I knew nothing about it and was a bit sceptical, I was willing to try anything. So I asked my doctor for a referral."

By late January, Vine was back at her GP's surgery, but this time to see the acupuncturist, Simon Robey. Robey is a former caterer who had retrained after a long stint travelling in China had opened his eyes, he says, to the power of Chinese medicine. He studied for three years at the Northern College of Acupuncture in York, and now works with the Hoxton Health Group, a charitable organisation based in East London, that provides complementary therapies to over-60s in Hackney for a subsidised fee of £ 11 a treatment.

"Chinese medicine insists on a holistic view of illness," says Robey. "So I started with the traditional 'ten questions', which go from head to toe and give a complete picture of a person's health. Vine reported pain in the right ankle and foot, as well as intermittent pain in the knees, hips, and back. The pain was worse after exercise, such as climbing the stairs, and she experienced restlessness at night. That information, along with palpitation of the ankle, confirmed that we were dealing with wear-and-tear arthritis in the ankle and not another kind of injury or inflammation."



British
Acupuncture
Council

Lindsey Vaughans Acupuncture Clinic
John and Associates
5 High Street
Tattershall
Lincoln, LN4 4LE

T: 01526 342309
E: info@acupuncture-lincolnshire.co.uk



With a firm diagnosis Robey could set about the first treatment. "Each meridian line in the body (see panel below) is associated with an organ in the body, and is believed to help to promote certain types of healing. I used a point on the gallbladder channel just below the knee, for example, because we think this meridian is associated with strengthening of the tendons.

"To take a whole-body approach, I also wanted to help alleviate the pain in Vine's knees and hips, and to strengthen her back; that meant using acupuncture points on both limbs." Fifteen needles were used in total, around the right ankle, and both lower limbs and knees, and they stayed in place for 15 minutes. "It felt strange at first," Vine recalls. "But once you realise it doesn't hurt, you get used to it."

What's more, after the first of six 40-minute weekly sessions, there were already good signs. "The pain in the ankle had subsided slightly," says Vine, "and my hips and knees felt a bit better, too." The pain crept back over a few days, but such an early response -albeit shortlived -is welcome, says Robey. "It usually indicates a patient who will respond well. The treatment is cumulative, so in the following weeks I repeated the needle arrangement, hoping to build on that start."

By week three, the pain in Vine's right ankle and foot had subsided enough for her to begin gentle walks in the park. "I advised her to start gentle exercise when she felt she could," says Robey. "With osteoarthritis, you can get a vicious circle where lack of movement causes further stiffness and pain, and so further immobility. Gentle walking can break that cycle."

Vine remembers week three as a turning point. But, she says, the benefits continued to build: "By the fourth treatment the pain in my ankle really was much reduced. My husband commented on how much easier I was walking. It was a pleasant surprise."

In fact, after six sessions with Robey there had been a small miracle; Vine found that she was pain-free all over, with no need for further treatment. And amazingly, since her last visit to Robey last March, she has stayed that way.



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"It's an excellent response," says Robey, "and her regular exercise and positive frame of mind point to long-term maintenance of the results."

Where Vine used to take eight painkillers a day, she is down now to just two before bed, as a precautionary measure.

"Nothing has alleviated the pain of my arthritis like this," she says. "These days, there's no pain in my ankle or foot, or my knees. I only get the occasional twinge in my hip, when I turn in bed. I still can't quite believe it, but I'm an absolute convert to the benefits of acupuncture."

STICKING POINTS

What is it? Acupuncture is a branch of Chinese medicine that aims to balance the natural energy (qi) in the body by inserting needles into the skin. The Chinese interpretation of acupuncture believes that qi flows along the body's 12 meridian lines, and illness occurs when the meridian lines become blocked. Acupuncture is intended to unblock them, restoring the flow of qi and so promoting healing.

Claims Chinese doctors say is good for almost all problems. It is best known in the UK for controlling pain and helping to give up smoking. It can also be used to treat headaches, colds, coughs and eczema.

Costs between £ 35 and £ 70 for an initial consultation lasting an hour.

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<http://www.acupuncture.org.uk/content/news/news.asp?id=49>



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