

An Apple A Day

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Interviewer: Good morning. On the programme this morning we have Dr Sylvia Carpenter, who is a family doctor. Dr Carpenter, you're a great believer in Chinese medicine, aren't you?

Doctor: Yes, I am. When I was a medical student I spent a wonderful month at a hospital in Hong Kong, where they use acupuncture as well as Western medicine, which is, of course, what I was studying. I saw how effective acupuncture could be, especially for people with digestive disorders, asthma, back pain or stress.

Interviewer: Now, you're not qualified to practise acupuncture yourself, are you?

Doctor: Oh, I'm just an ordinary GP or General Practitioner. I work in a small community, with about 3,000 people on my list. In the past we only referred patients to specialists at the local hospital for treatment – you know, to have their chests X-rayed or have a blood test done. Now I often suggest they see an acupuncturist as well, if I feel it would be of benefit. I can't actually recommend one specifically, but I keep a list of qualified ones.

Interviewer: So, say I go to see an acupuncturist about my backache. What would happen to me?

Doctor: Well, first of all the acupuncturist will ask you for very detailed information, not just about your medical history, but about your lifestyle, what you eat, what sort of exercise you do, how much sleep you get. The treatment you need is then decided and he or she will insert needles in various parts of your body. If you have a back pain, you won't necessarily have a needle in your back, though. It might be in one of your limbs – maybe in a knee or a wrist.

Interviewer: How often would I have to go?

Doctor: It depends on your problems. For some conditions, one or two treatments a week for several months may be recommended. For less acute problems, usually fewer visits are required. There aren't usually any side effects. You might feel worse for a couple of days, but that just means the treatment is working. It's quite common to feel exhausted after the first treatment, and this can be overcome with a bit of extra rest.

Interviewer: Now, the big question. Does it hurt?

Doctor: Well, it'd be wrong to say 'No'. It depends where the needles are inserted. Some areas are more sensitive than others. Once the needles are in place, there's no pain at all.

Interviewer: Are any positive benefits all in the mind, do you think?

Doctor: No, not at all. Acupuncture has been successfully used on cats and dogs. These animals don't understand or believe in the process that helps them to get better. A positive attitude towards the treatment may reinforce its effects, just as a negative attitude may hinder the effects.

Interviewer: It's a relatively new type of treatment, isn't it?

Doctor: Only in the West. It was first discovered in China in 2696 BC! In 1671 a French Jesuit priest wrote about his experiences in China and was the first Westerner to see acupuncture in use. In 1820 acupuncture was actually being used in a Paris hospital! Acupuncture received a lot of publicity in the West when James Reston, a reporter for the *New York Times*, was covering the visit of President Nixon to China in 1971. Reston developed appendicitis and his appendix was removed using acupuncture as the anaesthetic. He felt no pain during or after the operation because of acupuncture. But, in some ways, your question was right. Acupuncture is still a fairly new subject in the West, but growing all the time.

Interviewer: Thank you, Dr Carpenter. Now we're ...