

# Doctors Use Acupuncture as Newest Battlefield Tool

By Cheryl Pellerin

American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON, Dec. 10, 2010 – J.D. Nichols, a retired Navy flight officer and cryptologist, limped into the Air Force Acupuncture Center at Joint Base Andrews in Maryland early yesterday morning, leaning heavily on a cane.

A couple of hours later, moving easily without the cane and with the ends of tiny gold needles glittering in both ears, he waved goodbye to the military doctors who had reduced his pain using a technique called battlefield acupuncture.

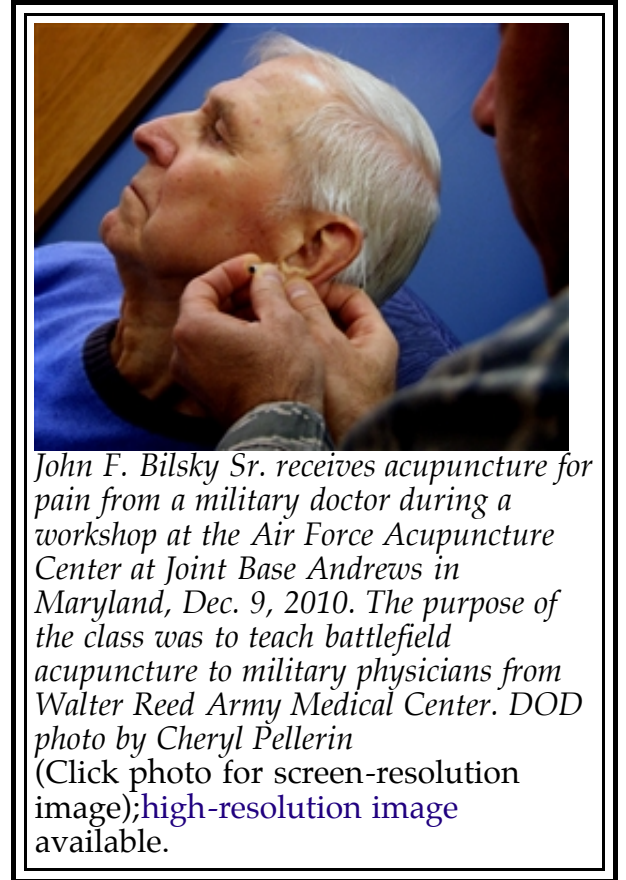
The doctors, from Walter Reed Army Medical Center, were part of a workshop on the technique developed by Dr. Richard Niemtow, a retired Air Force colonel who practiced medicine as a radiation oncologist before he studied acupuncture in 1994.

Nichols was one of four patients who volunteered for treatment at the 779th Medical Group's acupuncture clinic, where Niemtow and Dr. Stephen Burns, a retired Air Force colonel and full-time Air Force acupuncturist, train military doctors and treat patients.

"I walked yesterday and I barely made it home with the cane. That's how much pain there was," Nichols told the doctors after his treatment. "Now I'm walking without pain, as though I didn't have the problem."

"You said you felt like you could walk a mile," Niemtow said. "Would you have said that this morning when you first came here?"

"I didn't think I was going to make it to the car," Nichols said.



Niemtzow estimates that he and Burns have trained 60 physicians so far this year at Andrews and at Air Force and Army bases in Germany, Korea, Washington, Florida and Alaska.

“The Air Force Acupuncture Center is the first facility of its kind in DOD ever,” Air Force Col. (Dr.) John Baxter said. “It is a full-time acupuncture facility, and not only is it here to treat patients, it’s here to teach other providers and to do research.”

Baxter is director of the Pentagon Flight Medicine Clinic and a credentialed acupuncturist.

Acupuncture is being used as a treatment everywhere in the Defense Department, “but the Air Force led the way with two formal training programs of 20 physicians each,” Baxter said. “The Navy has one training program with 20 physicians and efforts are underway to have another tri-service training program.”

Healers in China and other Asian countries have practiced acupuncture for thousands of years. According to traditional Chinese medicine, disease is due to an internal imbalance of the opposing forces of yin and yang. Such an imbalance is believed to lead to a blockage in the flow of qi [pronounced chi], the vital life energy that flows along pathways called meridians, the philosophy says.

Meridians connect all systems in the body through a web-like matrix of at least 2,000 acupuncture points. Acupuncture is believed to unblock that vital energy.

Treating patients involves penetrating the skin with thin, solid metallic needles that are manipulated by the hands or by electrical stimulation.

The practice is controversial among some in the United States, but the National Institutes of Health recognizes acupuncture as evidence-based therapy that works for many kinds of medical conditions, Baxter said.

Scientists are studying the efficacy of acupuncture for a range of conditions, according to the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine in Bethesda, Md.

According to the 2007 National Health Interview Survey, which included a survey of complementary and alternative medicine use by Americans, 3.1 million U.S. adults and 150,000 children had used acupuncture in the previous year.

And in June, the Army surgeon general released a report that recommended “a holistic, patient-centered approach” to pain management that uses all kinds of therapy, from conventional medicine to “complementary and alternative modes such as acupuncture, meditation, biofeedback, yoga and others.”

In traditional acupuncture, practitioners use all 20 or so meridians. For battlefield acupuncture, Niemtzw uses only five points on each ear. Small, 1-millimeter gold or stainless steel needles are inserted and stay in place until they fall out or the patient removes them several days later.

The positive effects, Burns said, “last two hours, two days, two weeks, two months or two years -- we’ve seen everything.”

Most patients receive three to four treatments over several months and come to walk-in acupuncture clinics, held on Tuesdays and Thursdays, if their pain returns.

“Doctor Niemtzw developed the technique over many years of working with patients,” Baxter said.

“He localized five points and prioritized them into a protocol that any provider can use, without knowing anything else, like on a battlefield when you’ve got someone in serious pain,” he added. “It will take you five minutes or less and chances are you’re going to drastically reduce that patient’s pain.”

Before the workshop began, Niemtzw said, “All the patients we see at the U.S. Air Force Acupuncture Center have not responded well to Western medicine.”

Many patients “have complicated medical problems and traditional medicine hasn’t helped them. They’ve been to the orthopedic surgeon, to traditional pain management clinics, to neurologists and dermatologists and they’ve taken drugs for pain relief,” he said.

“The majority of patients come to our clinic seeking relief from pain. The pain medication they’re taking has not been satisfactory or they’ve not responded well,” Niemtzw said.

“For many patients it is a last resort, but our success rate is very high here, which is very rewarding for the patient and also for myself and Doctor Burns,” he added.

Air Force Lt. Col. (Dr.) Christian Hanley, also a credentialed acupuncturist, said acupuncture hasn't replaced traditional medicine, but it's a very good adjunct.

"This is a great gift we've been given," he said, "so we take it and use it."

During the workshop, the doctors treated three more patients, all of whom left the clinic with less pain than they arrived with.

"Nowhere in my experience of medicine in all these years have we had so many people walking away happy right from our interaction," Air Force Lt. Col. (Dr.) Dan Balog said.

Balog, who practices psychiatry and family medicine at the 79th Medical Group at Andrews, has used acupuncture on patients he treats for anxiety and depression.

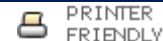
"It's pretty rewarding from the clinical side to see this," he said, adding that acupuncture is also an avenue for patients who already take a lot of medications.

With multiple medications, Balog said, "there's a lot of collateral damage that we don't always anticipate."

"There are people who still doubt this and I think they always will," Niemtow said, "but for us who are in the clinic every day, we see people suffering from the war and from this or that and there's nothing left to offer them. And we can put 50-cent needles in an individual's ear, and they look at you and smile and say, 'my God, I feel better!'"

"The question that comes to my mind is," Baxter said, "if you can make the majority of patients better during their clinic visit without medicines, then why are you still treating patients the old way?"

"We certainly would never go back [to practicing without acupuncture]," he said, "and I think the future for acupuncture will be bright."



## What's new in military medicine: The ancient art of acupuncture is new again

BY: CAPTAIN TREVOR AMBRON, MPAS, PA-C, USAF , JAAPA  
06/17/2010

Acupuncture is the term used to describe a family of procedures involving stimulation of anatomic locations on the skin by a variety of techniques. The most-studied mechanism of stimulation employs penetration of the skin by thin, solid, metallic needles, which are manipulated manually or by electrical stimulation. Traditional acupuncture can be traced back to ancient China and is now one of the most commonly used forms of health care worldwide. Western medicine has only embraced the practice over the past few decades. More recently, military medicine has begun to investigate the beneficial effects of medical acupuncture.

The term battlefield acupuncture (BA) was first coined by Air Force Colonel Richard C. Niemtow, MD, PhD, MPH, who is one of the US military's leading medical acupuncture researchers, president of the American Academy of Medical Acupuncture (AAMA), and full-time acupuncture physician at Malcolm Grow Medical Center, Andrews Air Force Base, Maryland. Utilizing five specific auriculotherapy (ear) acupoints, Dr Niemtow's BA method can deliver significant attenuation of pain in just a few minutes. ?

The BA technique can be repeated several times and involves using special semipermanent needles that can remain in the ears for 3 or 4 days before falling out on their own. Even when a servicemember is in full combat gear, the ears are easily accessible and therefore an ideal site for acupuncture. Traditionally, auriculotherapy utilizes known anatomic areas of the ear corresponding to body morphology.<sup>3</sup> Based on these anatomic landmarks, BA uses five specific locations in each ear, which are needled sequentially and quickly, one ear at a time, in the following order: Cingulate Gyrus, Thalamus, Omega 2, Point Zero, and Shen Men. Oftentimes, significant pain reduction can be achieved before utilizing all 10 acupoints. Depending on the presenting pathology, these pain-free effects can last minutes, hours, days, weeks, or even months.<sup>3</sup> Potential side effects are extremely rare and include superficial pain, bleeding, bruising, or infection at the needle site.?

How acupuncture works is still not completely understood; as described in its Chinese origins, the body contains pathways called meridians, in which energy, or qi (pronounced "chee"), flows. When the flow through these meridians is disrupted, pain or disease

develops. Insertion of fine needles at specific acupoints is thought to restore the flow of qi, which in turn leads to healing.<sup>1,2</sup> Modern scientific evidence suggests that the activation of opioid sites is at least partially responsible for the analgesic effect.<sup>4</sup> The BA method is thought to alter the processing of pain in the hypothalamus, thalamus, cingulate gyrus, and cerebral cortex structures.<sup>3</sup> ?

#### ADVANTAGES OF BA?

BA can be a useful adjunct for patients in whom narcotic use would be troublesome. Imagine being a military medic on a combat patrol that is ambushed and suffers casualties. Although several of your wounded troops have painful injuries, their trigger fingers still work and you need them to continue fighting. Instead of morphine, you grab your acupuncture needles and quickly stimulate the appropriate auricular acupoints. Pain relief is an essential component of combat casualty care; however, the use of narcotics risks taking the servicemember completely out of the fight. Beyond pain control, the potential advantages of BA to the injured warrior include staying in the fight with no alteration in sensorium and no nausea or vomiting. In addition, the use of narcotics would force the transport of patients on litters. More combat team members would be required to carry a patient than are required to provide ambulatory assistance for a patient still lucid enough to walk. ?

Dr Neimtzow and his team have also successfully incorporated acupuncture into the pain management arsenal available to injured servicemembers returning home from Iraq and Afghanistan. The variety and complexity of blast-related injuries have produced challenging pain issues, both in the acute and rehabilitation phases of care. ?

#### APPLYING BA TO PRIMARY CARE ?

The most practical application of BA may be on the "battlefield" of the daily clinic. Many military acupuncture providers have achieved good outcomes for acute and chronic conditions, such as headaches and musculoskeletal ailments, sometimes by using just a single auricular acupoint. ?

At home in the United States, the pain treated in emergency departments (EDs) may relate best to pain seen in a combat zone. Use of BA in the ED may be a viable option for pain relief and could potentially reduce the use of narcotics and their associated side effects. Acupuncture may allow patients to remain awake and alert and to leave the ED pain-free, without having to wait for narcotic side effects to wear off, thus freeing up valuable bed space in already crowded EDs. Those of us who work in family medicine also see a wide range of pain-related issues in which medical acupuncture could be a tremendous benefit. ?

While complete resolution of discomfort is the goal, the reality is often significant pain reduction, hopefully enough for troops to complete the

mission or return to duty or for civilians to go about their daily routine. Patients must be educated that acupuncture is not a replacement, but rather a supplement, complementing traditional Western treatments. In the noncombat environment, acupuncture is an additional therapy to consider after going through a standard history, physical examination, and diagnostic testing. ?

#### TRAINING TO BE AN ACUPUNCTURIST?

Certification by the American Board of Medical Acupuncture (ABMA) is currently open only to physicians and requires 300 hours of formal training in all types of acupuncture. The ABMA's parent organization, the AAMA, requires its physician members to have a minimum of 220 hours of formal training and 2 years of clinical experience. The practice of acupuncture by nonphysicians is regulated in at least 33 states; several other states have statutes pending.<sup>6</sup> As always, PAs should inquire about the specific training and oversight requirements for licensure and credentialing in their own state before implementing any therapy. In the military, the training of physicians in medical acupuncture and the goal of training and credentialing PAs in only the BA method represents the first potential large-scale incorporation of medical acupuncture use across the military health care system.

?Trevor Ambron is stationed at Moody Air Force Base, Georgia, and has served in both Iraq and Afghanistan. The author has indicated no relationships to disclose relating to the content of this article.

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## Military turns to acupuncture as alternative to prescription painkillers

By JENNIFER H. SVAN  
Stars and Stripes

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Lt. Col. Dan Ferris has taken some ribbing for what he calls “the bling in my ears.”

But the 44-year-old Air Force pilot doesn't mind: What appear to be post earrings are actually tiny acupuncture needles, which Ferris said have helped ease his chronic lower back pain, allowing him to keep up a relentless flying schedule during six months in Afghanistan. He can't pop painkillers, because fliers are limited to certain drugs and doses.

“Acupuncture helps with the pain, to the point of removing it,” Ferris said recently from Kandahar Air Field. “What else can you ask for when you have an injury? For me, it's better than drugs.”

The military is finding that Western medicine alone doesn't always work in relieving the suffering of troops dealing with a complex range of injuries after nine years of war, from multiple concussions to backs strained under heavy packs and body armor.

As the number of prescriptions for opiate painkillers skyrockets — and more troops admit abusing those drugs — the military has been forced to look beyond conventional ways to treat pain.

“This is a nationwide problem,” said Brig. Gen. Richard Thomas, assistant Army surgeon general. “We've got a culture of a pill for every ill.”

In June, the Army surgeon general released a report addressing the lack of a comprehensive pain-management strategy, suggesting alternative treatments including meditation and yoga.

Even though some in the medical field maintain that acupuncture has never been proved effective, the Air Force sees it as one of the more promising alternatives to combat pain.

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Dr. (Maj.) Ronald White, director of pain services at Landstuhl Regional Medical Center, applies an acupuncture needle on Master Sgt. Jamie Gilmore. Gilmore receives the treatment regularly for a bulging disk and other back pain.

MICHAEL ABRAMS/STARS AND STRIPES

The service runs the military's only full-time acupuncture clinic at Malcolm Grow Medical Center at Joint Base Andrews, Md. Last year, it launched a program to train more than 30 military doctors to use acupuncture in the war zone and at their base clinics. The program will be expanded next year with the Air Force, Army and Navy

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combining funds for two courses to certify 60 active-duty physicians as medical acupuncturists.

"I think we realized with some of the tremendous injuries these folks have ... we certainly want to find an alternative to help them out, to eliminate or reduce their use of pain medication," said Col. Dominic DeFrancis, medical corps director for the Air Force Surgeon General.

Acupuncture, he says, has few side effects and no apparent drug interactions, and it works quickly — allowing some troops with pain to return to duty faster.

"This is an effective therapy that works and should be part of our physicians' capabilities," DeFrancis said.

### Needles for the battlefield

The Air Force training, run in conjunction with the Helms Medical Institute of Berkeley, Calif., teaches military physicians a variety of acupuncture techniques, from traditional Chinese to Korean hand acupuncture. Clinicians also are learning a type of acupuncture developed in 2001 by an Air Force doctor that's being used in frontline hospitals and could be applied, Air Force officials say, right on the battlefield.

"The whole idea of the battlefield concept was trying to develop an acupuncture technique that would be generic for all pain and that would be very rapid in terms of its effectiveness," said Dr. Richard Niemtzw, a retired Air Force colonel who modified the method from French auricular acupuncture needles and the results of MRI studies on pain.

Small needles are placed in up to five pain-control points in each ear, and they stay for three or more days before falling out.

The sterilized needles are small enough to carry in a pocket, easily fit under a military helmet, and the technique is simple to apply, said Niemtzw, who's one of two full-time Air Force acupuncturists.

In the right combat situation, he says, acupuncture could replace a narcotic.

Lt. Col. Timothy Kaczmar uses battlefield acupuncture and more traditional acupuncture with bigger needles to treat patients at Kandahar Air Field's Air Force medical clinic. A flight surgeon at the Air Force Academy, Kaczmar completed an Air Force-sponsored acupuncture course last year.

"It's been a wonderful tool to have as a doctor here," he said.

He most commonly sees patients with back pain, headaches, sleep disturbances and anxiety. High doses of painkillers aren't a great option in combat, Kaczmar said.

"We're out here getting rocketed," he said. "You don't want to give them medication to the point where they're groggy."

Kaczmar successfully treated Senior Airman Emilie Johnston, 24, a medical technician from Vermont, who was struggling with almost daily headaches.

"A couple days ago, I had a headache coming on to where my vision was getting blurry," she said recently from Kandahar. "Dr. Kaczmar did ear acupuncture on me. In 15 minutes, my headache was gone. I haven't gotten a headache since then."

Master Sgt. Jamie Gilmore has tried physical therapy, muscle relaxers, steroid



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injections and chiropractor visits to address the chronic pain of a bulging back disc.

On a recent summer day, she dropped into the pain center at Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany, where Dr. Ron White used the Niemtzow technique, pricking both of her ears a millimeter deep with two needles, each gold, silver and platinum.

The first needles didn't bring immediate relief, but after undergoing acupuncture every two weeks for about a year, the pain is tolerable. Gilmore, 44, has been able to resume running, CrossFit training and other physical activities. Most importantly for her, she said, "I've been able to cut back almost completely on prescription medication."

### **Placebo effect?**

Acupuncture also has its skeptics.

Steven Salzberg, a professor and director of the Center for Bioinformatics and Computational Biology at the University of Maryland, College Park, and a fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, says acupuncture is "a joke to any serious scientist: There's absolutely no evidence that it works."

If it has any effect at all, Salzberg said, it's a placebo effect.

"People want to believe it works," he said.

Dr. Harriet Hall, a retired family physician and former Air Force flight surgeon, also charges that acupuncture is "nothing but an elaborate placebo."

"I hope no would consider giving a man wounded on the battlefield a sugar pill instead of morphine," she said. "Our soldiers deserve better."

But Alexandra York, a research associate in military medical research at the Samuelli Institute in Alexandria, Va., which studies alternative therapies, said "to just kind of boil it down to a psychological effect doesn't dig deep enough to what is really going on when acupuncture is administered.

"A number of MRI studies have shown the effect of acupuncture is really at the brain level."

Dr. Stephen Burns, a retired Air Force colonel and full-time Air Force acupuncturist, says the results speak for themselves.

"We've treated thousands and thousands of patients here with excellent results," said Burns, referring to his work with Niemtzow at the 779th Medical Group's acupuncture clinic at Malcolm Grow.

Each week, he and Niemtzow treat troops with blast wounds, missing limbs, concussions and other injuries at nearby Walter Reed Army Medical Center.

"Sometimes it's a little like peeling back the onion," Burns said. By easing their pain little by little, "We give them hope, then they go have a good night, a good weekend, and come back and we treat them again, while not giving them medication that could cloud their thinking."

White, an Army major and director of LRMC's pain center, said acupuncture isn't a cure-all for everyone. For about one-third of his patients, it's a "home run" and their pain goes away completely. With another third, the pain diminishes but doesn't disappear. And for a third, he says, "you strike out" — they feel no change.

As Niemtzow emphasizes, "It's not a magic bullet. Patients may find themselves being able to enjoy pain-free periods or reduced-pain periods, or combined with medication, a better lifestyle."

The science behind how acupuncture works is not fully understood, experts say. One theory, White said, is that acupuncture taps into nerve pathways to the brain. With the reception of dual pain and acupuncture signals, the brain's information processing gets

muddled and pain is disrupted or dulled.

White prefers to focus instead on the results.

“There’s no risk; it gives you benefit,” White said. “Our goal — my end result — is function. If you come to me complaining that you can’t play with your kids, you can’t sleep at night, you can’t work, and six months later, I have you playing, sleeping and back to work, I don’t care if it’s placebo.”

[svanj@estripes.osd.mil](mailto:svanj@estripes.osd.mil)

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