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Are you offering cosmetic acupuncture for the right reasons?



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So in this issue of Acu. we are talking about honesty, and I would like to take the opportunity to break my silence and discuss a trend I am seeing amongst ourselves as acupuncture practitioners.

'I want to learn cosmetic acupuncture. That's where the money is', says Fred. 'Can you teach me a few needle locations for cosmetic acupuncture? I am thinking of adding it to my treatment list', says Mary. 'Cosmetic acupuncture isn't that difficult. You just needle acupuncture points. Right?' says Malcolm.

These are the three most common statements I hear when approached by other acupuncturists.

Well my response to them is 'Why are you really interested in learning cosmetic acupuncture? Do you even know what the purpose of such cosmetic treatments really are? Has it always been of interest to you or are you actually following a trend?'

I recently carried out a survey on a small group of acupuncturists, asking them why they want to offer cosmetic acupuncture. Only two out of nineteen responses echoed my own reasons for practising. The other seventeen themselves didn't really know why: nine of them thought it was a great idea in the beginning but then found themselves in doubt as how to even promote the treatment to their patients;

while most of the remaining eight gave signs of simply following an up-and-coming trend in the cosmetic industry. Hand on heart, I believe that out of the nineteen respondents only four of them had a solid understanding of and good reasons to practise cosmetic acupuncture.

Back to basics: what's all the fuss about?

As we all know, ageing is a natural and ongoing process that we all experience and go through, whether we like it or not.

Throughout history, mankind has looked for a way to reverse the ageing process.

But we are currently living in a time when anti-ageing medical treatments and staying young has become an obsession. There are debates as to why we persist in fighting the ageing process. Many reasons are given, such as fear of death, loss of mental and physical control as we get older, and loss of sex appeal.

The anti-ageing market is a multibillion-dollar industry that has no growth limitations, even in the midst of a recession. A branch of science has been created to specifically focus on the study of preventing and reversing the ageing process. Scientists have cracked the DNA code which enables us to learn more about how we are made and as a result we learn more about how we age.

No method has yet been found to

reverse ageing. However, we do know how to slow it down. We live in an amazing time where the average lifespan of a human being has doubled since the beginning of the 20th century.

The cost of our beauty obsession

In 2008 a publication by the YWCA, a worldwide multicultural women's organisation, reported on the effects of our culture's obsession with an impossible standard of beauty. This report – 'Beauty at Any Cost' – detailed the different impacts that such an obsession with beauty has had on women's lives. I personally believe that men are also affected by this obsession, to a lesser degree, but that's a whole new topic on its own! These impacts are:

Economic costs: Women are spending so much money on quick-fix beauty solutions, money which in the long term could potentially provide for a comfortable retirement. This expectation of physical beauty has impacted women economically through 'lookism' in their workplace.

Self-esteem: More women tend to judge themselves based on their physical appearance, that is if they don't meet certain physical expectations they will not be accepted by others. This self-judgement has been associated with increased anxiety levels both in

adolescent girls (12- to 13-year-olds) and adult women, and has been linked to impaired performance in mental activities.

Health concerns: The pressure involved in the pursuit of beauty has led to various health concerns such as unhealthy dieting, eating disorders, smoking, and drug use. Another health concern is the risk that may come with medical cosmetic procedures such as cardiovascular complications from anaesthetics.

I believe that my role as an 'anti-ageing and cosmetic acupuncture practitioner' (whoa, what a mouthful!) puts me directly in the position of either supporting or not supporting the impossible beauty standards set by our culture. So if you are deciding on pursuing a career in cosmetic acupuncture, you need to understand where your patients' expectations are coming from. You need to be fully aware of how to gently let a patient know that his/her expectations may not be safe nor achievable.

Some patients might even go as far as accepting the slogan 'kill me but make me beautiful' – perhaps not literally, but certainly in spirit – and as acupuncture practitioners we need to intervene for their own safety. Instead of looking for beauty quick-fixes, we should be working together, practitioner and patient, to maintain optimum skin health holistically, which will in turn improve the overall appearance of an individual.

I am obsessed with unleashing people's true beauty from within. During this process I watch my patient gain confidence and good self-esteem. Life becomes more meaningful and happiness follows. This approach defines ageing gracefully in a very different way to what our society may usually expect from an ageing woman or man.

This level of care and treatment not only shows us that we can be naturally beautiful but it also reveals that true beauty is in the eye of the beholder. By carrying out cosmetic acupuncture treatments, we find ourselves responsible for bringing out a person's untouched inner beauty while simultaneously enhancing his/her natural features holistically.

I truly believe that 'no one is born ugly' and it is only culture and society that can shape and support this way of thinking. Hence we play a crucial part in this process by taking time to talk with our patient and to really understand why they feel the way they do about themselves.

The holistic approach to ageing gracefully

First of all, we need to know what ageing gracefully means. It's partly about attitude, acceptance and being flexible with life changes. But if you are

thirsty to find natural beauty solutions, it is also about doing what you can but without inflicting any further harm.

My preferred approach to beauty is definitely a holistic one. Holistic beauty means looking at the entire person, including areas such as lifestyle, diet, medical history, personal stressors, skincare, exercise and attitude.

I believe that attitude is the key factor that defines the result a patient gets from his/her treatment. I regularly get enquiries from new patients who have unrealistic beauty expectations. But once we sit down and go through the initial consultation I have the chance to educate my patient as to what will really benefit them in the long run. They always choose to go down the holistic approach route. They may come in looking for just one quick-fix solution for their beauty needs, but they end up leaving my treatment room having had more than just a beauty treatment.

Contrary to what many patients might think, cosmetic acupuncture is primarily about health not beauty, which is why I refer to them as 'patients' and not just 'clients'. Our cosmetic acupuncture patients will not only see immediate results cosmetically but also long-lasting effectiveness due to balancing their internal health and hormones via acupuncture.

Let's assume our patients have realistic expectations, are not obsessed with staying young forever, and understand that health is as important as beauty. They may still want to look better as well as feel healthier, and there's nothing wrong with this! But at this point, another question arises:

Why adopt cosmetic acupuncture over other treatments?

If like me, you prefer a holistic and natural alternative approach to beauty, then cosmetic acupuncture is the right way forward, it's a no-brainer. Adopting this method enables your patient to ditch the mentality of needing surgery, fillers, Botox and similar invasive treatments. Dermatologists often use antibiotics and chemicals on the skin. Topical skincare products and medications help some skin conditions but not those caused by internal hormonal problems. Botox is a poison, and one that needs to be repeatedly injected into the body if patients want

to be line-free. Acupuncture is far closer to a natural intervention than all of these, and in many cases much safer. Choosing a natural method that promotes healthy blood circulation in the body is the best way to get long-term results.

For thousands of years, the Chinese have known that internal nourishment and the smooth flow of blood within the body reveal themselves through a healthy external radiance. The practice of acupuncture to enhance beauty dates back to China's Song Dynasty (960-1279) when it was used by the empresses and the emperors' concubines. I would say, what was good enough for the Chinese at that time should be good enough for us now. Let's really go back to basic skincare!

In brief, it's vital that we offer cosmetic acupuncture correctly and for the right reasons. But when we do, cosmetic acupuncture will give your patients amazing natural results without the risks, hefty price and recovery time that is required with medical beauty procedures. They will keep receiving compliments from friends and family about how good they look and how they have a youthful glow about them. And

no one will ever know what they have had done, unless they choose to tell them!

Which is a good time to also mention the downside to offering cosmetic acupuncture: never expect a referral from your patient. They will want you to be their best-kept beauty secret!

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