

# Acupuncture as Ecologically Sustainable Medicine

by Joel Kreisberg, DC, CCH

**E**cologically Sustainable Medicine (ESM) includes any medical practice that promotes the health and well-being of an individual while positively affecting the health and vitality of his or her community and the global ecosystem. A person with a debilitating illness such as asthma, colitis or arthritis who receives a treatment that is safe, harmless, non-polluting, and cost-effective is being treated with Ecologically Sustainable Medicine. Acupuncture is an Ecologically Sustainable Medical practice. Acupuncture catalyzes healing energy in a natural manner promoting both personal and ecological health.

## The principles of Ecologically Sustainable Medicine include:

- Safe and harmless
- Clean, non-toxic and non-polluting
- Cost-effective
- Adaptable and flexible
- Protective of the quality of life on earth, the environment and earth's natural resources
- Synergistic with human health and planetary well-being
- Connected with the web of life

## Acupuncture is safe and harmless

A central principal of ESM is that those therapies that cause the least harm – to people and the environment – are the wisest choice. Many studies document the safety of acupuncture (1,2). The National Institute of Health consensus statement in 1997 declared that “one of the advantages of acupuncture is that the incidence of adverse effects is substantially lower than that of many drugs or other accepted medical procedures used for the same conditions.” (3)

In contrast, studies show that drug mistakes, known as “adverse drug events,” occur in up to 10% of all hospital visits (4), causing more than 750,000 injuries each year. Estimates of U.S. deaths from these drug events range from 44,000 to 98,000 per year (5). In addition, most conventional pharmaceuticals, especially prescription drugs, have undesirable short-term and long-term side effects.

## Acupuncture is clean, non-toxic and non-polluting

Sustainable health modalities are often low-tech and non-polluting, producing lit-

tle if no waste. Other than the use of needles, acupuncture consumes few resources. While most acupuncturists use disposable needles, the volume of waste is relatively small and the metal can be safely recycled if necessary. There may come a time when needles will be recycled making acupuncture completely non-toxic to the environment. In addition, for those acupuncturists that use herbs, these medicines may increasingly be grown using organic methods with no negative consequences.

This modest use of resources stands in direct opposition to the general overuse of resources in standard medicine. For example, the overuse of antibiotics in humans and livestock creates drug-resistant strains of super-bacteria. Many people don't realize that those antibiotics are making their way into our waterways and water supplies (6,7). The incineration of medical waste often emits dioxin and other dangerous chemicals into the air. Hospitals, laboratories, and medical offices generate massive amounts of waste, some of which is radioactive and hazardous waste that we have no viable means of disposal for. HealthCare Without Harm, an environmental advocacy organization, monitors the waste stream of hospitals in America. It advocates diminished use of mercury, PVC, and DEHP in hospitals, as well as insuring the proper disposal of medical waste. Recent statistics can be found on the organization's website ([www.hcwh.org](http://www.hcwh.org)).

## Acupuncture is cost effective

One of the central principles of sound environmental thinking can be summarized by the familiar phrase “small is beautiful”. Ecologically sustainable practices are cost-effective, often requiring little if any technological investment, compared to traditional biomedical hospital care. As our society continues to acknowledge the limitedness of our natural resources, the true cost of medical services will continue to favor cost effective Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) therapies, which are generally more sensitive to resource utilization. In this vein, the cost effectiveness of acupuncture has been researched and documented (8,9,10). More than any other reason, value and savings are the primary reasons acupuncture continues to be paid for by more insurance companies.

## Acupuncture is adaptable and flexible

Bioregionalism is an ecological philosophy favoring decentralization of society by promoting regional economies and local control of resources. Long before bioregionalism became a significant movement in the US, Chinese medicine relied on the tradition of the “Barefoot Doctor.” Today, sustainable forms of medicine are typically practiced in small offices and clinics, much as in this ancient tradition. Mobile practitioners are able to bring care to the home or workplace since they don't have to rely on extensive equipment and facilities, such as laboratories and hospital-based diagnostic procedures. ESM practices are therefore also recognized as those that are available and accessible locally, providing affordable services in the communities where they are most needed.

Acupuncture can be practiced anywhere people live. Since 1989, students at the University of California Berkeley have been operating “Suitcase Clinics,” in which volunteer health professionals and students provide free medical care and other needed services to poor and homeless people. One branch of the Suitcase Clinic, the Youth Clinic, was founded by an acupuncturist. Here, street kids are regularly treated on portable tables behind a curtain in the church where the clinic meets. This is just one example of the adaptability of acupuncture as a modality.

## Acupuncture is protective of the quality of life on earth, the environment and earth's natural resources

The use of Five Element Theory by Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) offers a holistic vision of human health within an environmental equilibrium. The constant cycling in nature that follows a semi-predictable pattern provides healers and patients with a guide to balancing energy and human health. Promoting human health then automatically provides a protective service for the environment. In the Five Element vision, following a more earth-centered lifestyle allows for a richer and more synergistic relationship with our environment.

Traditional western medicine continues to suffer from an anthropocentric approach to health and natural resources. Natural resources are used for the greatest

benefit of individual patients regardless of the consequence to other life forms on the planet. Premarin (**Pregnant Mares Urine**) provides a potent example of the ecological consequences of allopathic medical practices. Premarin, still being consumed by nine million American women, requires 308 farms to maintain enough pregnant mares to produce enough urine for consumption in America per year. These mares, housed in tiny stalls for six months, will all produce foals that have a greater than 90% chance of becoming a meat product (11).

### Human health and planetary well-being are synergistic

A foundational concept of ESM is that the well-being of the planet is interdependent with our personal health. According to this view, medical treatments must not cause further damage to an already severely degraded ecosystem. Illness, such as the global epidemic of cancer, may well be much more than a series of individual expressions of disease. In my view, it most likely represents a larger ecological imbalance expressing itself through our individual states of health. Acupuncture and other ESM practices offer long term solutions for chronic illness as well as for the sub-optimal health conditions that so many people experience. By teaching people how to understand their health in terms of energy meridians and natural planetary cycles, acupuncture and TCM encourage an ecological understanding of health and well-being and offer a positive vision of how to heal the larger world in which we live.

### Acupuncture promotes the connection with the web of life

Many environmentalists and psychologists are studying the problems caused by the increasing alienation of people from the natural world. In America, it was not until the last century that vast numbers of people began to live urban, industrialized lives that are largely devoid of intimate contact with the forests, waters, gardens, fields, and ecosystems that sustain life on earth. Some experts theorize that this separation is one source of the high incidence of depression, emotional problems, and stress-induced illnesses that we see in our country today.

It might be a bleak picture, but acupuncture and ESM are part of the solution, both in large and small ways. Acupuncture, herbal medicine, homeopa-

thy and other forms of ESM put people back in touch with the Earth as a source of healing. They return the responsibility of healing back to the patient, encouraging the patient to understand that healing is a response generated within the body to bring it back into balance. This lesson, experienced first hand with acupuncture, can easily be extrapolated to a larger understanding of how we can, through our choices, contribute to the larger balance of the world we live in.

Ecologically sustainable therapies bring nature back into our lives. These gentle methods help people shift to a more holistic way of viewing the world — a mysterious, wondrous world of boundless interaction and synergy. They may begin to value and cherish our Earth and come to understand the importance of our role as conscious caretakers of the environment.

### References

- (1) MacPherson, H, Thomas, K, Walters, S, Fitter, M, "The York Acupuncture Safety Study: *British Medical Journal* 323 (2001) 486-487. <http://bmj.bmjournals.com/cgi/reprint/323/7311/486.pdf>
- (2) Yamashita, H, Tsukayama, H, Tanno, Y, and Nishijo, K, "Adverse Events Related to Acupuncture" *JAMA* 280 (1998) 1563-a-1564-a. <http://jama.ama-assn.org/cgi/reprint/280/18/1563>
- (3) "Acupuncture." *NIH Consensus Statement* 15(5) (1997)1-34. [http://odp.od.nih.gov/consensus/cons/107/107\\_statement.html](http://odp.od.nih.gov/consensus/cons/107/107_statement.html)
- (4) Woodcock, J. "Testimony on Medical Errors: Understanding Adverse Drug Events" Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions, February 1, 2000 <http://www.hhs.gov/asl/testify/t000201a.html>
- (5) "Crossing the Quality Chasm: The IOM Health Care Quality Initiative" Institute of Medicine, <http://www.iom.edu/subpage.asp?id=14980>
- (6) Alliance for the Prudent Use of Antibiotics <http://www.tufts.edu/med/apua/>
- (7) Lappe, M. *When Antibiotics Fail*, 1995 North Atlantic Books
- (8) Lindall, S. "Is Acupuncture for Pain Relief in General Practice Cost-Effective" *Acupuncture in Medicine* 17(2) 1999 97-100 [http://www.medical-acupuncture.co.uk/journal/1999dec/page\\_97.pdf](http://www.medical-acupuncture.co.uk/journal/1999dec/page_97.pdf)
- (9) Christensen BV; luhl IU; Vilbek H; Bulow HH; Dreijer NC; Rasmussen HF. "Acupuncture treatment of severe knee osteoarthritis: a long-term study", *Acta Anesthesiol Scand* 36: 1992 519-525.
- (10) Ballegaard S, Norrelund S, Smith DF. "Cost-benefit of combined use of acupuncture, Shiatsu and lifestyle adjustment for treat-

ment of patients with severe angina pectoris." *Acupunct Electrother Res* 21(3-4),1996 187-97. (11) <http://www.premarin.org/>

*Dr. Joel Kreisberg is the executive director of the Teleosis Foundation ([www.teleosis.org](http://www.teleosis.org)), a not-for-profit organization dedicated to educating health professionals and environmentalists about the principles of Ecologically Sustainable Medicine (ESM). He is an Associate of the Habnemann College of Homeopathy and the Bengal-Allen Institute in Calcutta, India and maintains clinics in Berkeley, CA.*

*Joel will be presenting "Ecologically Sustainable Medicine: Fostering a Healthy Environment" at CSOMA International Expo South on Friday, February 27 from 2:00 to 5:30. ■*

## PIHMA Symposium 2004

**Oriental & Integrative Medicine**  
at the 2004 Integrated Health & Fitness Expo  
Phoenix Civic Plaza • April 2, 3 & 4, 2004  
Shop at Over 200 Exhibitor Booths!

**15 CEU's for \$195\***

\*Early Registration Rate

### Sponsored by:

Phoenix Institute of Herbal Medicine & Acupuncture  
Arizona State University East

### Partial List of Speakers

John Chen • Pamela Wallach • Dan Lobash  
Fred Lerner • Lewis Mehl-Madrone  
John Porter • Alex Zautra • Leonard Goldstein  
Satya Ambrose • Donese Worden  
Marilyn Allen • Pamela Anne Pappas  
Mary Delaney • Wendy Lee • Phyllis Cochran  
...and more!



**P I H M A**  
COLLEGE & CLINIC  
301 E. Bethany Home Rd., Suite A-100  
Phoenix, AZ 85021 • 602-274-1885

Copyright of California Journal of Oriental Medicine (CJOM) is the property of California Association of Acupuncture & Oriental Medicine and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.