Exploring Change Processes in Acupuncture for Back Pain: A Qualitative Thematic Analysis

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Background
Personally, economically and socially, back pain is costly (1) and is commonly used for LBP (2). In randomised clinical trials acupuncture has shown large effects on chronic pain compared to usual care or waiting list controls but often only small effects compared to sham acupuncture (3,4). This suggests acupuncture has large non-specific effects, i.e., factors other than needleling characteristics contribute to patients’ outcomes (5). Indeed, acupuncture can be conceptualised as a complex intervention in which changes in patients’ health are produced not only by needling but also by more psychosocial factors such as empathic therapeutic relationships and holistic consultations in which discussions of lifestyle and self-care triggers help in how patients think and feel about their symptoms and their ability to manage them (6-9). However, little is known about the psychosocial factors and processes that might be involved in acupuncture for LBP.

Aims
• To explore patients’ experiences of acupuncture for back pain
• To identify psychosocial processes that might support clinical changes

Methods
We conducted a qualitative study using semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis. 23 interviewees were purposively sampled from a nationwide longitudinal questionnaire study (n=485) (10,11). We deliberately interviewed men (n=8) and women (n=15), of varying ages (29 – 82 years), receiving acupuncture in diverse settings (7 acupuncture clinics; 5 physiotherapy; 9 pain clinic; 1 general practice), with different adherence levels (17 attended all appointments). We also sampled for diversity in outcomes (positive/negative/no change in disability/pain/wellbeing).

Conclusions
Clinical changes in back pain as a result of acupuncture may be supported by therapeutic relationships that empower patients and attend to their concerns.

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References

Summary
Participants described how, on starting treatment, they were desperately hoping that acupuncture would improve their ability to function and enjoy their lives despite back pain, and so they typically cared little about how it might work. They expressed concerns about acupuncture needles and side-effects, and trusted acupuncturists who made them feel safe, explained the treatment clearly, and interpreted changes favourably to their experiences of conventional care.

Real relief, absolutely very noticeable relief from the back pain for 24 hours

I think being released from some intense pain helps your emotional state and your psychological state as well because I think coping with that is a huge stress, all the time.

It's just a shame it didn't work. But they've informed me that because of what is happening to my spine, there's nothing they can do. It's changed my lifestyle a lot though.

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