

Anyone Else Ready for a New Paradigm?

By Beth Heller and Tami Quinn



Acupuncture burst onto the consciousness of the fertility community in 2002 with findings from Paulus et al.* that acupuncture treatment administered directly before and after IVF embryo transfer significantly increased odds of pregnancy. From the outset this study has been a blessing and a curse for holistic practitioners: a blessing because it introduced legions of infertile women to the healing science of Traditional Chinese Medicine; a curse because the Paulus protocol (or "German Protocol" as it's known in the TTC world) itself flies in the face of

one of the basic tenets of TCM - that treatment is individualized and based on each patient's unique constitution and presenting pattern. Since the original study, many different groups have tried to replicate the research with divergent outcomes.

This week the fertility community was deluged with headlines like this one from the Daily Mail: "Acupuncture 'provides no help with IVF,' say fertility doctors." This flurry of media interest was prompted by [new guidelines](#) from the British Fertility Society that state that "there is currently no evidence that having acupuncture or Chinese herbal medicine treatment around the time of assisted conception increases the likelihood of subsequent pregnancy." This recommendation was based on the Society's review of 14 clinical trials that examined acupuncture intervention around the time of embryo retrieval and transfer and found no evidence that acupuncture improves clinical pregnancy rate, live birth rate or miscarriage rate.

And so the debate continues as to whether acupuncture used around the time of embryo transfer improves the odds of pregnancy success. At least [one other meta-analysis by Manheim et al. found benefit](#) in acupuncture treatment with IVF, but [others](#) have not. All the researchers who have undertaken a meta-analysis of this data have agreed that there is great deal of variability in the studies reviewed in terms of intervention, timing, acupuncture points used, placebo/no placebo - making it difficult to group data and compare outcomes.

What is so unfortunate is that yet again the rich healing traditions of holistic medicine in general (and TCM in particular) fall victim to a dominant medical paradigm that doesn't quite know how to test their efficacy. The BFS was quick to say that acupuncture before and after embryo transfer "provides no help" with IVF but makes no mention of the potential of TCM for reducing stress and increasing blood flow and potentially improving the hormone profile of women who are trying to conceive, naturally or with ART.

Traditional Chinese Medicine and other holistic modalities like Ayurveda, yoga therapy and massage and nutrition counseling take an individual approach to treatment that addresses the root cause of symptoms rather than symptoms themselves. For this reason, these systems do not shine in the western medicine research paradigm of standardized intervention.

Studies looking at TCM done the "TCM way" do exist, though they seldom stand up to rigorous criticism under the "western" paradigm and as a result we are reluctant to cite them in scientific circles. Take, for example, [our recent blog post](#) reviewing a study published by Kong et al. in the journal Medical Acupuncture. This study found IVF success rates of double the national average in patients treated with Traditional Chinese Acupuncture in conjunction with electro-acupuncture. The patients were **required** to have a minimum of 12 treatments and 24 patients had more than that. The groups were treated with individually selected TCA points by the tenets of Chinese medicine according to each patient's presenting pattern and diagnosis. Now, this isn't a gold-standard study but it's certainly quite interesting.

Luckily there is a growing number of physicians willing to talk about a new paradigm inclusive of the broader value of holistic therapies for women who are trying to conceive. At Pulling Down the Moon, we are lucky to work with Fertility Centers of Illinois and Shady Grove Fertility who recognize the far-reaching benefits of holistic care for their patients.

"I believe that caring for the overall well-being of my patients yields the best success," says Brian Kaplan, Reproductive Endocrinologist at Fertility Centers of Illinois. "I have seen the benefits of offering holistic adjuncts such as acupuncture, massage, nutrition and yoga to traditional IVF protocols. These treatments help my patients feel confident they are taking all the right steps toward greater mental and physical well-being. "

We hope the British Fertility Society is listening...

*Paulus et al. Influence of acupuncture on the pregnancy rate in patients who undergo assisted reproduction therapy. Fertil Steril 2002;77:721-4.