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ACUPUNCTURE VERSUS BOTOX: SALESMANSHIP OR SCIENCE?

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National report -- Proponents of facial acupuncture say it represents a viable and increasingly popular alternative to Botox (botulinum toxin, Allergan) treatments for some facial rejuvenation patients. Cosmetic surgeons, however, say they'd like to see proof of its efficacy.

How popular?

Mary Elizabeth Wakefield, L. Ac., M. S., M. M., *Adjunct Professor of Facial Acupuncture at Acupuncture and Integrative Medicine College, Berkeley, CA*, and a recognized advocate of facial rejuvenation acupuncture in North America and worldwide, says that while no one tracks the number of acupuncture procedures performed annually, she has personally trained more than 2,000 acupuncturists to perform her trademarked treatments in *Constitutional Facial Acupuncture Renewal™*. She herself does 30-40 such procedures weekly.

“I've seen a rise in interest” reflected through media interviews and stoked by treatments she provided in conjunction with the 2005 Oscars, later profiled nationally on Discovery Channel's FitTV, says Ms. Wakefield, who practices in New York City.

“I treat close to 20 patients a week,” adds Shellie Goldstein, L.Ac., M.S., an acupuncturist who practices in Manhattan and East Hampton, N.Y., and has trademarked a technique called the AcuFacial.

“One would expect acupuncture to be tried in New York or Los Angeles,” says Jean D. Carruthers, M.D., clinical professor of ophthalmology at the University of British Columbia. However, she says she treats many actors from those locations who work in Canada, “And they're not changing over” from Botox.

Conversely, a number of Ms. Wakefield's practitioner-students in the Los Angeles area have reported that they are routinely “de-Botoxing” young Hollywood hopefuls who, due to their inability to emote as a result of the injections, have been instructed to “unfreeze” their immobile facial muscles.

Nevertheless, Ms. Goldstein says that while Botox treats only specific complaints such as wrinkles, “Acupuncture treats the entire body.” In research she conducted with a physician, she says that the AcuFacial -- for which she typically uses 10 facial needles and 10 more distributed between the arms and legs -- improved both facial wrinkles and complaints including headaches and gastrointestinal problems (presented at American Academy of Medical Acupuncturists Symposium, March 31-April 3, 2005, Atlanta; submitted for publication).

“Acupuncture treats the energetic system of the body,” which Chinese medicine interprets as a system of meridians that normally flows freely, Ms. Goldstein says. However, problems including stress and injuries block this flow, while inserting acupuncture needles at points along these meridians helps direct energy (or qi) where needed, she says.

“The face is a reflection of the body. Any wrinkle or sagging to us is a representation of something that's happening in the body as well,” says Ms. Wakefield. As such, she says that instead of a quick fix, acupuncture accomplishes gradual, organic changes that can last two to three years if properly maintained.

Acupuncturists have long been treating chronic pain, overactive muscles and spasms, says Dr. Carruthers. However, she states, “What had been found in the past when it was studied scientifically was that it worked transiently” in dystonia patients.

However, Ms. Goldstein notes that Botox's effects also fade over time. “Whether one's wrinkle is reduced for three months with Botox, or acupuncture helps one sleep better for nine months -- take your pick,” she says.

Regarding facial acupuncture, Dr. Carruthers says, “The skin swells when one puts needles into it. It's an interesting concept, but where's the proof? It's good marketing, but it's not science.”

The procedure's effects need to be quantified, says Laurie A. Casas, M.D., associate professor of surgery, Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine (and American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery spokesperson).

She states, “Most acupuncturists don't have any studies to draw from when they're presenting the case for doing it on their patients. The attitude is almost like, let's try it and see if it works.”

In contrast, she says, “Botox has been FDA-approved for the specific indication of wrinkle reduction, which it accomplishes by paralyzing muscles that create the wrinkles. Efficacy and dosing have been worked out” through hundreds of studies.

Not far-fetched?

“In our practice, we have never seen anybody who felt that they had acupuncture that gave them results comparable to Botox. However, it's not completely far-fetched to think that one might get some subtle improvements with repetitive acupuncture treatments in lines of movement,” says Vic A. Narurkar M.D., a San Francisco-based dermatologist in private practice, assistant clinical professor of dermatology at UC Davis Medical Center and president of the American Society of Cosmetic Dermatology and Aesthetic Surgery (ASCDAS).

Nevertheless, he says, “I'd really like to see some good before and after pictures.” Ms. Wakefield suggests viewing a Flash movie at www.bluemtnacupuncture.com, a site belonging to one of her Canadian practitioner-students.

Dr. Narurkar adds that since acupuncture typically requires at least 10 weekly sessions, “I don't know of many people who have the luxury” for such a schedule. Even if acupuncture were moderately effective, he says, “It doesn't seem to offer any advantage over Botox. And the costs appear quite expensive.”

Dr. Carruthers adds, “It costs about as much to have acupuncture for a year as it does for a ton of Botox.” According to the American Society of Plastic Surgeons, the average physician's fee for a Botox injection in 2004 was \$376, more in major cities.

Acupuncture is “cheaper than an injection of Botox or a facelift,” contends Ms. Wakefield, who typically recommends 12 to 15 initial treatments -- the first (a two-hour consultation) priced at \$350, later visits around \$175.

Ms. Goldstein says she discounts prices to \$140 per session for patients who buy a series of 10 or more. At this rate, she explains, a year of treatment, including nine monthly follow-up visits, costs around \$2,660.

Before and after photos of facial acupuncture



1) prior to treatment

2) after 5 weeks

3) after 10 weeks

As for facial acupuncture's target market, Ms. Goldstein says, "The people using my AcuFacial service are those who would not choose botulinum, for personal or health reasons, as a beauty enhancement option. Or they're not good candidates," such as pregnant women.

"I see a trend in more men coming for treatment," including executives seeking to refresh their appearances without drastic alterations, adds Ms. Wakefield. "We're also seeing the metrosexual -- a straight man who's taking care of himself," she says.

"As an acupuncturist," says Ms. Wakefield, "I am not in favor of botulism for vanity purposes." Nor are many of the aging-averse baby boom generation, she adds. "They're eating organic food" and often can afford to take care of themselves however they choose, says Ms. Wakefield.

Contraindications for acupuncture include migraines (which Ms. Wakefield recommends addressing first) and pre-existing Botox injections, she notes.

Regarding limitations, Ms. Goldstein says that "Even with acupuncture, if one has a very deep glabellar crease, it's not going to go away completely. But it doesn't with Botox either."

On a broader scale, Dr. Narurkar says he's concerned that acupuncture could mirror the trajectory of several highly touted aesthetic technologies that lacked scientific substance. "What could be a useful treatment might be overpromoted by less-than-ethical nonphysician practitioners," thereby creating unrealistic expectations and possibly harming patients, he explains.

"If the acupuncturists are really serious," Dr. Narurkar states, "they should do a side-by-side study" comparing acupuncture against Botox. "Until we have that definitive study," he says, "it's very unethical to promote acupuncture as a way to treat facial lines of expression."

"It's very hard to compare apples and oranges. Acupuncture is not better or more effective -- it's different," counters Ms. Wakefield, who, in addition to contributing a regular column on facial acupuncture and related topics to *Acupuncture Today* magazine, is finishing a case study and writing a book on the subject.

"Acupuncturists aren't really research oriented," adds Ms. Goldstein. They rarely work in medical settings, particularly those with research funding, she explains.

Nevertheless, Ms. Wakefield points out that in one Chinese study reported in the *International Journal of Clinical Acupuncture* involving 300 patients (available at www.allertonpress.com),

“Researchers achieved good results in 90 percent of cases -- these patients not only looked better, but they also felt better.”