



# acupuncture

**Acupuncture is an ancient therapy, dating back at least 2000 years in China. It involves the insertion of very fine needles into specific points on the body, which are traditionally believed to influence the flow of 'qi' (loosely translated as 'vital energy') in the body. It is one of the most popular complementary medicines in England.**

## the yin yang balancing act by Tom Kennedy

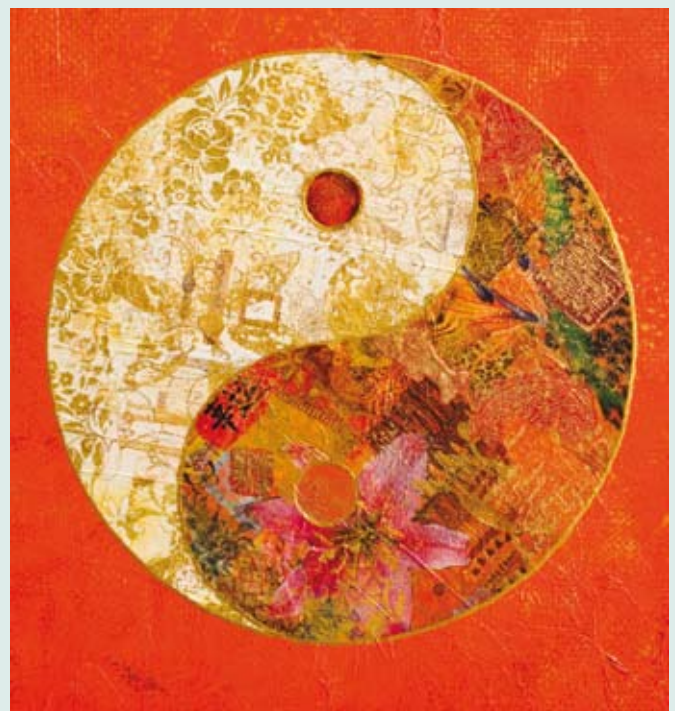
When I talk to strangers at parties and they discover that I stick pins in people for a living, they usually make a face of some kind. Sometimes it's a look of surprise or interest, sometimes it's slightly scornful. Occasionally, it's closer to sheer terror. But whatever reaction I get, people usually seem to have acupuncture success stories about someone they know.

I'm often asked 'how does it work?', and certainly that's a difficult question. A scientist (an open-minded one) will explain it in terms of increasing blood flow, regulating hormones and stimulating nerves. But as a practitioner, I find the traditional Chinese concepts much more useful. I must admit my rational mind struggled to come to terms with these ideas early in my training – 'qi', or 'energy' flowing around the body in invisible channels just seemed so farfetched. However, over time it's made more sense to me and I now feel privileged to practice such a rich, fascinating and effective medicine. The more I learn, the more Chinese medicine comes to life, and the more successful my treatments become.


### the art of balance

Put very simply, acupuncture is a balancing act. Any condition can be understood in terms of the balance of yin and yang in the body, and the acupuncturist's job is to needle points which will help to redress any imbalance. Certain types of headache, for example, can be seen as an excess of yang in the head which can be drained with points on the hands and feet. Sweating at night and anxiety might suggest a lack of yin, and different points would be selected in this situation. All signs and symptoms help the acupuncturist decide where the imbalance lies, which means everything said during a consultation is taken into account. This can be an empowering experience for the patient, and often it helps them make sense of their experience.

I feel as though acupuncture is on the brink of a big development in this country. NICE (the organisation that advises the NHS) has recently endorsed acupuncture for the treatment of back pain. Also, new regulations will be coming into place over the next couple of years making sure only properly trained practitioners will be allowed to treat the public. New research is being published all the time demonstrating acupuncture's effectiveness for a whole variety of conditions.



### affordable & accessible

But to my mind, the most exciting recent development is the advent of 'multi-bed' clinics. These are places where acupuncture is practiced in an open-plan setting (similar to how it's done in China), meaning practitioners can treat more than one person at a time. Screens and blankets are used to maintain privacy. This method means the price can be kept to about half that of standard one-to-one treatments, making it more accessible to a lot of people. I really hope the NHS will embrace this idea, so that one day acupuncture will be made available for free to everyone, not just for back pain but also for the many other complaints it can treat so effectively. 

Tom Kennedy is a member of the British Acupuncture Council, and he works in Bristol's bigroom multi-bed clinics ([www.bigroomacupuncture.co.uk](http://www.bigroomacupuncture.co.uk)). To see whether there are any multi-bed clinics in your area, visit the Association of Community and Multibed Acupuncture Clinics website ([www.acmac.net](http://www.acmac.net)).