

York Study Maps The Effects Of Acupuncture On The Brain

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Important new research about the effects of acupuncture on the brain may provide an understanding of the complex mechanisms of acupuncture and could lead to a wider acceptability of the treatment.

The study, by researchers at the University of York and the Hull York Medical School published in Brain Research, indicates that acupuncture has a significant effect on specific neural structures. When a patient receives acupuncture treatment, a sensation called deqi can be obtained; scientific analysis shows that this deactivates areas within the brain that are associated with the processing of pain.

Dr Hugh MacPherson, of the Complementary Medicine Research Group in the University's Department of Health Sciences, says: "These results provide objective scientific evidence that acupuncture has specific effects within the brain which hopefully will lead to a better understanding of how acupuncture works."

Neuroscientist Dr Aziz Asghar, of the York Neuroimaging Centre and the Hull York Medical School, adds: "The results are fascinating. Whether such brain deactivations constitute a mechanism which underlies or contributes to the therapeutic effect of acupuncture is an intriguing possibility which requires further research."

Last summer, following research conducted in York, acupuncture was recommended for the first time by the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) as a treatment option for NHS patients with lower back pain. NICE guidelines now state that GPs should 'consider offering a course of acupuncture comprising a maximum of 10 sessions over a period of up to 12 weeks' for patients with this common condition.

Current clinical trials at the University of York are investigating the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of acupuncture for Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) and for depression. Recent studies in the US have also shown that acupuncture can be an effective treatment for migraines and osteoarthritis of the knee.

The York team believe that the new research could help to clear the way for acupuncture to be more broadly accepted as a treatment option on the NHS for a number of medical conditions.

Source: York University