



Facial Acupuncture Gaining Ground

Facial Acupuncture Gaining Ground As a Popular Way to Tighten Chin Skin, Erase Wrinkles

The Associated Press

Dec. 19, 2004 - Paula Scardamalia has pins in her face nine tiny ones angling out near her eyes, mouth and jaw. The pins were poked in to tighten chin skin and erase lines on the 52-year-old woman's face. The practice, called facial acupuncture, is becoming popular as a sort of holistic alternative to trying to turn back time through toxins or surgery.

"This has got to be healthier than Botox or a surgical facelift," said Scardamalia, the little needles wagging slightly.

Interest in facial acupuncture might be connected to the rising popularity of alternative medicine, or to society's obsession with youth and beauty, or to the mass of aging baby boomers. Whatever the reason, acupuncturists report a wave of interest in the ancient Chinese practice.

"It's very hot," said Mary Elizabeth Wakefield, a New York City practitioner whose facial work now consumes about three-quarters of her practice.

Acupuncturists typically stimulate selected points on the body with hair-thin pins to promote good health and alleviate pain. They view it as correcting energy imbalances along the body's "meridians," which carry an energy flow called Qi (pronounced "chee") a concept many mainstream physicians say lacks scientific evidence.

In facial acupuncture, needles are usually stuck in wrinkles and sags to bring more blood, Qi and muscle tone to an area. The theory, in a nutshell, is that a healthy face is a better-looking face.

"As you might imagine, facial acupuncture for, shall we say, cosmetic purposes, was not one of the core issues in ancient Chinese medicine," said Michael McCoy, executive director of the Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine Alliance. "It just turns out to be an interesting application that fits a lot of cultural values of the present."

Some practitioners advertise the process as an "acupuncture facelift," though more tradition-minded practitioners blanch at the term. Wakefield says that's an improper label for what amounts to an organic healing process .

Marion Bergan, the licensed acupuncturist who treated Scardamalia for a demonstration, offers "facial rejuvenation acupuncture" in addition to her medical acupuncture. The 90-minute procedure includes an herbal face mask, a massage and a mild electrical stimulation. But the underpinning, so to speak, remains acupuncture.

Most of Bergan's facial customers are women in their 50s and 60s. But Wakefield said her practice gets a fair share of men, too.

"They realize in order to keep their jobs and to get jobs, they need to look younger," Wakefield said.

Patients who get over any aversion to having needles stuck in their face find out it doesn't hurt, at least not much.

Bergan stuck eight needles in my face and neck with little discomfort. A needle was jabbed into the furrow between my eyes. No pain. Then laugh lines. No pain. Then my cheeks. OK, felt those. But the needles were thin and the jabs shallow.

The needles were out within a half-hour, leaving no trace of pinprick wounds. Facial lines, such as they are for someone in his late 30s, were still there after a single treatment.

Mary O'Connell, a 60-year-old treated by Bergan last year, said she noticed a tighter face after her sixth of 10 weekly treatments.

"It didn't put me back to age 16," she said. "... What it did do is take out the heavy, deep, deep lines around my cheeks and mouth and has sort of eliminated the drawn, tired look."

Ten treatments ran O'Connell about \$1,300. That's cheaper than a facelift. A treatment with Botox, the wrinkle-smoothing agent derived from the toxin that causes botulism, can cost around \$400.

While millions of Americans have had acupuncture treatments, the practice has never been fully embraced by the American medical establishment.

The American Medical Association has no position on it. The National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, part of the National Institutes of Health, cites on its Web site research that found evidence acupuncture is useful for managing pain, depression and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

Proponents cite an 8-year-old study in the International Journal of Clinical Acupuncture that found a 90 percent success rate for facial acupuncture.

Still, some medical professionals are dubious. Stephen Barrett, a retired psychiatrist who runs the Quackwatch Web site, compares faith in Qi and meridians to believing in ghosts.

"I can't think of any anatomical reason why needles in the face would affect wrinkles," he said.

O'Connell said that besides making her face look younger, the process just made her feel good.

Which is part of the point. Bergan said many clients are starting to visibly age and the acupuncture helps them deal with it in a healthy way.

"The women just need a little lift," she said.

On the Net:

National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine:

Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine Alliance:

Chi-Akra Center:

Quackwatch:

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