Acupuncture as an adjuvant therapy in stroke rehabilitation?

**Ernst E, White A R**

Authors' objectives
To summarise the current data on the role of acupuncture in stroke patients.

Searching
MEDLINE was searched from 1969 to 1995, and CISCOM for December 1995. No search terms were provided. The bibliographies of the retrieved papers were searched for additional trials, and experts in the field were contacted.

Study selection
Study designs of evaluations included in the review
Studies were included if they examined the clinical effects of acupuncture in stroke patients, and if they included a control group.

Specific interventions included in the review
Acupuncture. The various methods of acupuncture were described as: Chinese acupuncture; acupuncture at classical or temporal points; or needling point Shengen.

Participants included in the review
Human stroke patients, either acute, subacute, cerebral infarction, or undefined stroke patients.

Outcomes assessed in the review
The 'clinical effect' of acupuncture was assessed. The actual outcomes measured appear to vary from study to study, although limited details were provided. Those outcome measures that were documented in the review included measures of motor and cognitive function, such as the Barthel Index and posture control.

How were decisions on the relevance of primary studies made?
The authors do not state how the papers were selected for the review, or how many of the authors performed the selection.

Assessment of study quality
The authors do not state that they assessed validity.

Data extraction
The authors do not state how the data were extracted for the review, or how many of the authors performed the data extraction.

Methods of synthesis
How were the studies combined?
The included studies were summarised in a narrative manner.

How were differences between studies investigated?
The authors do not state how differences between the studies were investigated.

Results of the review
Six clinical trials with a total of 425 patients were included in the review: 5 randomised controlled trials and 1

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Each of the 6 studies reviewed appeared to demonstrate some form of improvement in the groups receiving acupuncture. However, no detailed study results were provided. Two studies demonstrated significantly better Barthel Index results at 1 and 3 months. Another study showed better motor function, activities of daily living and quality of life at 6 weeks.

Authors' conclusions
Several trials suggested that acupuncture is a useful adjunct for stroke rehabilitation. However, methodological flaws in the studies indicate that the current data are inconclusive and further trials should be initiated.

CRD commentary
This was a poorly reported systematic review. The objective of the review was fairly clear, some details of the literature search were provided, and the narrative summary of the data was appropriate. However, no search terms were provided, and details of the second database searched (CISCOM) were lacking. The inclusion criteria for the review were unclear in terms of the types of patient, the type of acupuncture, and the study designs required. No validity assessment was undertaken, although some methodological criticism was provided in the text of the review. No study details were provided with regards to the numbers of patients per group, the care provided to the control groups, the individual study methodologies and the results; these were stated to be unavailable for some of the studies. Although the authors provided a relatively limited discussion of the included studies, the narrative summary and the authors' conclusions seem appropriate.

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Record Status
This is a critical abstract of a systematic review that meets the criteria for inclusion on DARE. Each critical abstract contains a brief summary of the review methods, results and conclusions followed by a detailed critical assessment on the reliability of the review and the conclusions drawn.