



TAI CHI & QI GONG FOR HEALTH

Why Dry Needling is different from Acupuncture

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There has been a lot of debate & controversy even legal argument related to the practice of these therapies. This article aims to differentiate these two distinct treatment options without bias but based on research & references from the current literature.

History

There are clear historical differences between Dry Needling Therapy & Acupuncture. The history of a discipline is important as a starting point from where we can begin to understand & become more informed about any subject. Here, we can see that Dry Needling comes from a medical origin and importantly the use of a syringe to alleviate pain rather than an acupuncture needle.

Dry Needling

Dry Needling's origins began in the 1930's & the work of a British Rheumatologist, Dr John Kellgren from University College Hospital, London.

He discovered that injecting saline into muscles could produce pain in a distinct pattern

remote from the site of the injection (1 & 2). Dr Kellgren also found that manual pressure

over tender areas in muscle tissue could produce the same referral patterns as an

injection. Injecting a short-acting analgesic procaine injection could relieve the pain produced by the manual pressure.

In the late 1930's Dr Janet Travell, a cardiologist from the USA became interested in the earlier work of Kellgren. She questioned the mechanism of the analgesic effects of

procaine on tender muscle tissue areas because the analgesic effect lasted much longer

than the 90-minute duration that procaine normally provides. She found that the injection needle alone could relieve the pain that is evoked from manual pressure over

a tender muscle, hence the term "dry needling"(3).

Acupuncture

Is thought to have originated more than 5300 years ago. The discovery of Oetzi the Tyrolean Iceman in the Otzal Alps in Austria by 2 German hikers is perhaps the first evidence of acupuncture treatment (4,5).

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Oetzi, an almost perfectly preserved hunter from Neolithic times was marked with health related tattoos over the back & leg. These are thought to indicate a form of acupuncture or acupressure prescription, if this relationship is correct then it predates

Chinese origins of Acupuncture in 200-100 BC with the publication of the seminal work, The Yellow Emperor's Internal Classic.

Definitions

Definitions provide us with clarification with respect to a description of the technique &

the scientific, historical & philosophical basis about which the technique is based. We can also use this to state an objective & purpose of the treatment in question.

Here we can see that Dry Needling is focused on treating a single tissue, which causes

pain. Conversely, Acupuncture is based on treating general health conditions that are

not within the scope of practice of many of the therapists who practice Dry Needling

Therapy & are not Acupuncturists.

In addition, the examination procedure for locating a myofascial trigger point or taut band in muscle tissue relies on manual palpation skills. These manual skills are used in

conjunction with a physical examination, orthopaedic testing & case history analysis.

Physical therapists are trained extensively in these areas.

Acupuncturists use a variety of different examination skills that are specific to Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) such as pulse & tongue examination. Palpation over tender muscle areas is not part of a normal TCM examination.

So, the technique is different, the aim is different & the procedure prior to the application of the skill or intervention is completely different.

Dry Needling

Dry Needling is defined as rapid, short-term needling to altered or dysfunctional tissues

in order to improve or restore function. This may include but is not limited to myofascial trigger points, periosteum & connective tissues. It may be performed by an

acupuncture needle or any other injection needle without the injection of a fluid (6).

Acupuncture

Acupuncture is the stimulation of specific acupuncture points along the skin of the body

involving various methods such as penetration by thin needles or the application of heat, pressure, or laser light (7).

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What do they treat?

Dry Needling

Pain arising from muscle tissues or myofascial tissues.

Acupuncture

The World Health Organization (WHO) states that acupuncture is used to treat over forty different medical conditions, including allergies, respiratory conditions,

gastrointestinal disorders, gynecological problems, nervous conditions, and disorders of

the eyes, nose and throat, and childhood illnesses, among others. Acupuncture is also

used in the treatment of alcoholism & substance abuse. It is also used to treat headaches and chronic pain, associated with problems like back injuries and arthritis.

Treatment method

Perhaps one of the most profound differences is the fact that Dry Needling targets a painful muscle trigger point, which is variable in location & unrelated to other location sites of pain. Whereas Acupuncture treatment is independent of pain location, it is dependent on a TCM diagnosis and needling a subsequent combination of sites or Acupoints based on that diagnosis.

The needles are left in situ for generally a much greater period than those used in Dry Needling.

Pain reduction & restoration of motion range are treatment outcomes of Dry Needling that are often seen immediately after removal of the acupuncture needles. The effects

of Acupuncture are normally seen sometime after the treatment.

This is not to imply that Acupuncture is in any way less effective than Dry Needling.

The distinction is made because it's important to appreciate that Acupuncturists are treating completely different conditions to those of Physical Therapists with differing outcome measures than those of pain or improvement in range of motion, which can be tested and observed more easily.

Dry Needling

Acupuncture needles are placed into trigger points or taut bands of muscle tissue that

are palpated by the practitioner. The aim of treatment is to restore normal muscle

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health, tissue tension & local physiology. This has the effect of reducing pain that arises

from these tender taut bands in muscle tissue.

Acupuncture

Acupuncture needles are placed into distinct locations called Acupoints, which are found on 12 imaginary channels or meridians on the body. The meridians connect the

360 primary Acupoints distributed throughout the human body (8).

Who practices these therapies?

Acupuncturists often claim that Physical Therapists only train for a weekend or less in

order to practice Dry Needling. This is untruthful & misleading. Dry Needling therapists

have already completed, in some cases over 2000 hours of training focused on musculoskeletal conditions & treatment prior to attending a Dry Needling course.

To practice Dry Needling in Australia one must have completed an accredited course.

A Dry Needling course provider must have their course material assessed by the relevant professional associations to ensure it meets the continuing professional development learning outcomes & objectives. In addition, practitioners must advise their professional indemnity insurer that they are qualified to practice Dry Needling.

To say that there are no regulatory bodies to protect the public from unsafe Physical Therapists who use Dry Needling is also untrue. Dry Needling along with all other treatment modalities are highly regulated by professional associations & the Australian

Health Practitioner's Regulation Agency.

One cannot compare the duration of a Dry Needling course, which may be between 20-60 hours with that of the training for an Acupuncturist.

To be eligible to attend a Dry Needling course a practitioner must already have an undergraduate qualification as a Physiotherapist, Osteopath, Chiropractor or Remedial

Massage therapist. This initial training can be 5 years in the case of an Osteopath or Chiropractor or 4 years as a Physiotherapist in Australia. Remedial Massage Therapist

must have completed a minimum of 100 hours of anatomy training within their

Diploma course.

Acupuncturist train as undergraduates completing a course that is 5 years in duration.

This type of course often includes training in other modalities such as Chinese Herbal

medicine.

Is Dry Needling Safe?

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Yes. Dry Needling is very safe when performed by a trained therapist. According to a study in 2013 that looked at 7629 Dry Needling treatments & the adverse outcomes resulting from those treatments, the risk of a serious adverse reaction or event was 0.04%. To put this into perspective, the risk of an adverse event after taking Aspirin is

18% & Panadol is 14.5% (9).

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