

P-05-1114 Allow traditional acupuncturists in Wales to practice during lockdowns, Correspondence – Petitioner to Committee, 29.01.21

Gwenan Evans Acupuncture

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Janet Finch-Saunders AS/MS
Chair, Petitions Committee
Senedd Cymru

29 January 2021

Dear Ms Finch-Saunders

Response to email P-05-1114 Pwyllgor Deisebau 09.02.21 / Petitions Committee 09.02.21C received 25 January 2021

Thank you for the above email, informing me that our Senedd Petition (number 244380 - Allow traditional acupuncturists in Wales to practice during lockdowns) will be discussed by the Petitions Committee on Tuesday 9 February, and inviting us to respond to the attached document, i.e. ref KS/07505/20, the letter from Ken Skates AS/MS, Minister for Economy, Transport and North Wales.

We would like to emphasise that although the main thrust of the current petition was in respect of practising during lockdowns, this was a continuation of a long-standing discussion between the British Acupuncture Council (BAcC) and the Welsh Government regarding the historic mis-classification of traditional acupuncture as a close contact service (listed alongside tattooists and hair and beauty services), rather than as part of the independent healthcare sector, akin to physiotherapists, chiropractors and osteopaths. This inconsistency in classification has caused considerable confusion which came to a head with the regulations concerning closure of premises during the November Firebreak lockdown.

We are therefore delighted to note that the latest published version of *The Health Protection (Coronavirus Restrictions) (No. 5) (Wales) Regulations 2020*, state that: "Exempt premises Public services etc.[include] 49. Dental services, opticians, audiology services, chiropody, chiropractors, osteopaths, physiotherapy services, acupuncture services and other medical or health services, including services relating to mental health."

Additionally, we note that in the latest update (dated 26 January 2021) of the *Business Closures Alert level 4*, although acupuncture is still included under the category of close contact services, practitioners are exempt from closure if they offer "treatments or services

which are providing medical treatments for illness or injury.” Once again, we appreciate this amendment and clarification.

In view of these developments, which meet the main petition requests, we have decided to withdraw the petition and would like to record our thanks to the Welsh Government for taking these steps to recognise acupuncturists as healthcare practitioners, bringing much needed consistency in Welsh legislation relating to acupuncture. The Public Health Wales Act (2017) recognises BAAC members as equivalent to statutory regulated healthcare professionals who also use acupuncture as a medical technique. We hope that this position will be reflected in any future legislation that affects BAAC members in Wales.

We would, however, like to take the opportunity to comment on the letter from the Minister for Employment, Transport and North Wales. While I and my fellow members of the British Acupuncture Council in Wales welcome Mr Skates’ advice that “those close contact practitioners that are clinically qualified and work out of a clinical setting can remain open”, we are somewhat perturbed by the following condition “but only for treatments referred to them by the NHS”, as this is the first time we have ever seen this restriction in any communication from the Welsh Government, and there is no such wording in any legislation concerning Covid-19 regulations that we have consulted.

Our colleagues in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland are permitted to treat patients with urgent medical conditions without the NHS referral requirement. We believe that the requirement of an NHS referral adds unnecessary pressure and paperwork to an already overstretched health service in Wales. Indeed, one of the strongest arguments for allowing acupuncturists to continue to practise is that we are able demonstrably to ease the pressure on the NHS by offering treatments for both acute and chronic conditions for which patients would otherwise need to call directly on NHS resources.

The fact that over 1,000 people have signed our petition is testimony to the high regard in which acupuncture is held in our communities throughout Wales. *Annex 1* contains 16 testimonials from patients who have been receiving regular treatment from traditional acupuncture practitioners in Wales. A couple of examples are shown below.

“I get flare ups of trigeminal neuralgia which is excruciating pain in the face. Acupuncture really helps me, more so than the tablets I am given. The only recourse without it would be to burden the NHS which I am loath to do given the stress they are under and I would be placing myself in harm’s way going to a hospital.” Trigeminal neuralgia patient, Cardiff

“I have found that acupuncture has been an invaluable and integral part of my healing from Long Covid. From my very first session, I noticed a reduction in symptoms and this trend was repeated for every session. Among other things: my headaches, brain fog, and other neurological symptoms reduced, and on an emotional level I have found it has helped me to be more grounded and resilient”. Long Covid patient, Cardiff

A Snapshot Audit of acupuncture practitioners in Wales, conducted by the British Acupuncture Council, shows that in the month prior to the November 2020 Firebreak lockdown 99% of patients receiving acupuncture treatments had defined medical

conditions. *Annex 2* is the full report of this Audit, which collated data from 341 treatments given between 28 September and 25 October 2020. The main conclusions are shown below:

- Over a period of four weeks, traditional acupuncturists in Wales treated a range of medical conditions including pain, anxiety, and insomnia.
- People often sought acupuncture for help with long-term conditions and chronic pain.
- During acupuncture treatment, a third of patients reduced the amount of prescription medication they were taking.
- Key workers made up almost a quarter of the acupuncture patients, demonstrating its particular value in the current situation.
- Also significant numbers of the patients treated were elderly, indicating the benefits they perceive at a time when otherwise they might not leave their homes.

Thank you for your consideration of this response. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you require any further information or clarification.

Yours sincerely

G Evans

Gwenan Evans BSc PhD LicAc MBAC
(on behalf of Cardiff-based BAcC members)



Annex 1 – Patient testimonials

“I was ill in March with suspected Covid and am now Long Covid and still having symptoms. I received 5 sessions of Acupuncture ... I have found that acupuncture had been an invaluable and integral part of my healing ... From my very first session, I noticed a reduction in symptoms and this trend was repeated for every session. I have had numerous benefits from Acupuncture. Among other things; my headaches, brain fog, and other neurological symptoms reduced, and on an emotional level I have found it has helped me to be more grounded and resilient. Every time I have visited the clinic I have been impressed with the safety measures in place, even down to HEPA air purifiers in the room and building. In fact, there are more measures in place than some medical facilities I have visited. I am not alone in finding Acupuncture of benefit. There are numerous accounts on the Support Group I am a member of having the same positive experience.” K C

“I get flare ups of trigeminal neuralgia which is excruciating pain in the face, like you wouldn't believe. Acupuncture really helps me, more so than the tablets I am given. The only recourse without it would be to burden the NHS which I am loath to do given the stress they are under and I would be placing myself in harms way going to a hospital. I really hope that Welsh Assembly Government reclassify acupuncture as it really is an essential health service to me and so many others.” A B

“I had Post Viral Syndrome following having the Covid 19 Virus in March. I was just not recovering from the debilitating Inflammation, Gastrointestinal Issues, Fatigue, Brain fog, Chest Pain and the Mental Struggle that comes with having the Corona Virus in such uncertain times. I was recommended Acupuncture by the Facebook support group as so many were getting significant relief from their symptoms which was aiding their recovery. I did my research and booked an appointment ... and I am so glad I did, because in a few sessions all my post viral symptoms have been resolved. My family noted the significant change in me, not only physically but mentally.” L J

“I first went ... for Acupuncture after months of suffering what I now realise are Long Covid symptoms. I thought I was losing my mind. Doing the smallest thing left me so fatigued, unable to concentrate, headaches, chest pain, breathlessness as well emotionally unable to cope with how I was feeling. My GP has been unable to offer little in the way of advice and treatment options for my symptoms and while I was sceptical about Acupuncture helping, I was at my wits end and didn't have anything to lose in trying. After my first session the effect was profound, and my improvement both physically and mentally has been significant with subsequent sessions.... every session has been conducted with the highest health and safety measures in the same clinical setting that others which are deemed as essential use. As a nurse my role is essential but without continued Acupuncture, I will be unable to fulfil my job to the best of my ability.” G S

“I came ... for my anxiety which has been worse over lockdown. Acupuncture has helped me tremendously through these hard times and I would like to take this opportunity to tell everyone that it relaxes me when I am anxious. I feel good after every session, which makes me function on a higher level than if I was stressed.” J G

“I was receiving acupuncture whilst undergoing IVF treatment, before and during the pandemic. ... As an individual I am quite a stressful person and find things get on top of me quite a lot. Once I started my treatment of IVF I found my stress levels became even more exacerbated but after starting acupuncture I found it extremely beneficial...It was not only beneficial for my body ..., it helped massively with my stress from day to day and coping with the IVF I was receiving. ... IVF has been one of the hardest things I've been through but myself and my partner were very lucky that our 4th attempt worked and I am now pregnant, and I really believe that [acupuncture] treatments added to our positive IVF outcome as I felt completely relaxed and positive.” J G

“I attended acupuncture once a week during September and October 2020, and monthly after, until the recent lockdown. I first went ... with a very painful neck and frozen shoulder that was disturbing my sleep, my ability to dress, and to carry out my work. I also am hypothyroid with Hashimotos, with long term fatigue and vertigo made worse by a virus I had in May- this might have been Covid but I did not get tested then. I had visited the G.P. a few times and also seen the physio, however I was feeling very unwell and nothing was improving: Neither were able to offer me any help. As soon as [I] started ... acupuncture my symptoms improved, and I now have no pain, no vertigo, and much more energy and clarity. My ability to concentrate at work (as an academic researcher at Cardiff University) has also improved. Acupuncture has literally changed my life. When I go to the clinic, it is a professional health care setting, with high standards of hygiene and attention to PPE”. HS

“I suffered from Covid-19 in March 2020 and although my symptoms were not life threatening, afterwards I experienced long Covid symptoms including vertigo which was extremely stressful and debilitating. Despite being given tablets by my GP I did not see any signs of recovery for many weeks and so decided to try acupuncture after reading about how it might be able to help.... After 1 treatment my vertigo had definitely lessened and after 2 treatments it disappeared completely and has not returned. If I had not been able to have these treatments I would have been suffering greatly for many months.” M A

“I have been having acupuncture treatment since 2015. I first went for treatment for low moods and insomnia caused by the emotional strain of caring for my Mum who had Alzheimers. I found the treatment helped me enormously and since then have had regular monthly appointments. Not only has acupuncture helped me emotionally but I have also had great relief for various physical problems. I suffer from osteoarthritis in both my knees and hands, treatment relieves pain and inflammation making life so much more comfortable. Other health issues...have all been improved through regular treatments. I've

found that it's important for me to have regular treatments to maintain the improvement in my health. Not being able to see my practitioner during lockdowns has been difficult and had a detrimental effect on my health." SM

"I started having Acupuncture after 7 months of struggling with the very debilitating effects of Long Covid. After the first session I felt an immediate relief in symptoms with a big weight of fatigue being lifted. As time went on symptoms continued to reduce after each session, particularly fatigue. The sessions also provided a big mental boost, as my previous debilitating symptoms had a big impact on my day to day life - let alone life as a professional athlete. I have no doubt that acupuncture sessions played a big part in getting to where I am today - with little to no day to day symptoms, and very close to fully recovered. I am now able to exercise 7-8 hours each week, prior to having Acupuncture I could only manage a 25 minute walk. I was keen to pursue treatment after Christmas as I feel this would be a big factor in enabling me to reach the point of full recovery, but have not been able to do so with the current lockdown restrictions." CS

"I have suffered from Multiple Sclerosis since 2004. For nearly 10 years I was being treated by traditional Western medicine, however my condition worsened in 2013 and I was subsequently diagnosed as having transitioned into Secondary Progressive Multiple Sclerosis. There is no mainstream medical treatment for this. I tried numerous alternative therapies to help to alleviate the pain and progression of my symptoms and the only treatment that has worked for me is acupuncture. I have been crying with agony from pain but after a single session with a qualified acupuncturist - my pain has disappeared. MS causes my limbs to go numb, and I lose all co-ordination - but after a single session of acupuncture, I can have feeling again and be able to walk...Acupuncture has allowed me to survive with a debilitating disease and is an essential part of my life. In not having access to these services over lockdown, my condition has worsened, I have been forced to live in agonising pain - and it has been a severe detriment to my mental health." RT

"I am a professional who works in health and social care. I have had acupuncture at various points in my life over the years. Initially to overcome the after effects of glandular fever around fatigue and anxiety. The acupuncture helped me move this along, increase energy levels and improve my clarity of mind. I returned to acupuncture during the covid 19 pandemic. As a key worker I began to feel exhausted and drained. I was becoming anxious. I also think i contracted covid early into the pandemic just before tests became available. The GP strongly suspected it was covid as the symptoms matched the local profile and timescale. After recovering I developed a skin condition on my arm which was painful and uncomfortable and it persisted for months. I returned to acupuncture as I recognised my health and wellbeing was being adversely affected. From the sessions I felt calmer, more balanced and less fatigued, I was more able to cope with the demands of my job and the painful skin condition cleared up. Lockdown then came and sessions stopped. I have been a long time user of acupuncture. It helps maintain my health and wellbeing. This is particularly needed as a key worker during the pandemic." JY

I am a Professor and work as the head of an academic department. I had cancer prior to having acupuncture and I started to suffer with 'chemo brain' type symptoms, a common lingering after-effect of chemotherapy, where I struggled with a lack of mental clarity, poor concentration and fatigue. This was stopping me being able to do my job and was causing considerable worry and stress. Over the course of a couple of months Acupuncture resolved these issues and I now find that having it every 4 to 6 weeks helps me keep well." PG

I have had ME/CFS for more than eighteen years. There is no treatment and no cure for this awful illness and my health board, Cardiff and Vale of Glamorgan, provides no NHS services or support. In January 2020 I had acupuncture. The difference it made to my health was enormous and I had more energy than I had had for years. The lockdown which began in March 2020 meant my treatment was again interrupted. It was interrupted again during the firebreak lockdown and has been interrupted for a third time due to the current lockdown. Each time this lack of treatment has set me back." DF

" Four years ago I caught a virus, which, in combination with overwork in my social care worker role, depleted my body to such an extent that I was diagnosed with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome. I went from being a very fit young person in my early 30's, to someone who could not walk or move without immense pain and fatigue in my body. I was off work for months. I made a full recovery and acupuncture played a central role in this. the treatment I received was a crucial part of the overall therapy that aided my recovery. Acupuncture had a marked impact not only on my physical wellbeing, but my mental wellbeing also." BD

"I came to try acupuncture after suffering with regular migraines and headaches for around 10 years. I had tried conventional medicine and seen various doctors but I found no long lasting relief. It was impacting my life quite negatively as I was having to take time off work, and would sometimes lose multiple days as all I could do was stay in bed. After a course of acupuncture treatment I found a significant reduction in the severity and regularity of my headaches and the migraines basically disappeared. It is definitely a necessity to me, and I have struggled during the lockdowns when I my symptoms gradually started returning in the absence of my monthly top up treatments." AD

A snapshot audit of the work of acupuncturists in Wales today

Rachel Edney - MBAcC
Mark Bovey – BAAC Research Manager

Members of the British Acupuncture Council in Wales conducted a snapshot audit in order to understand more about who consults a traditional acupuncturist and why. Data was collected for the period 28th September to 25th October 2020.

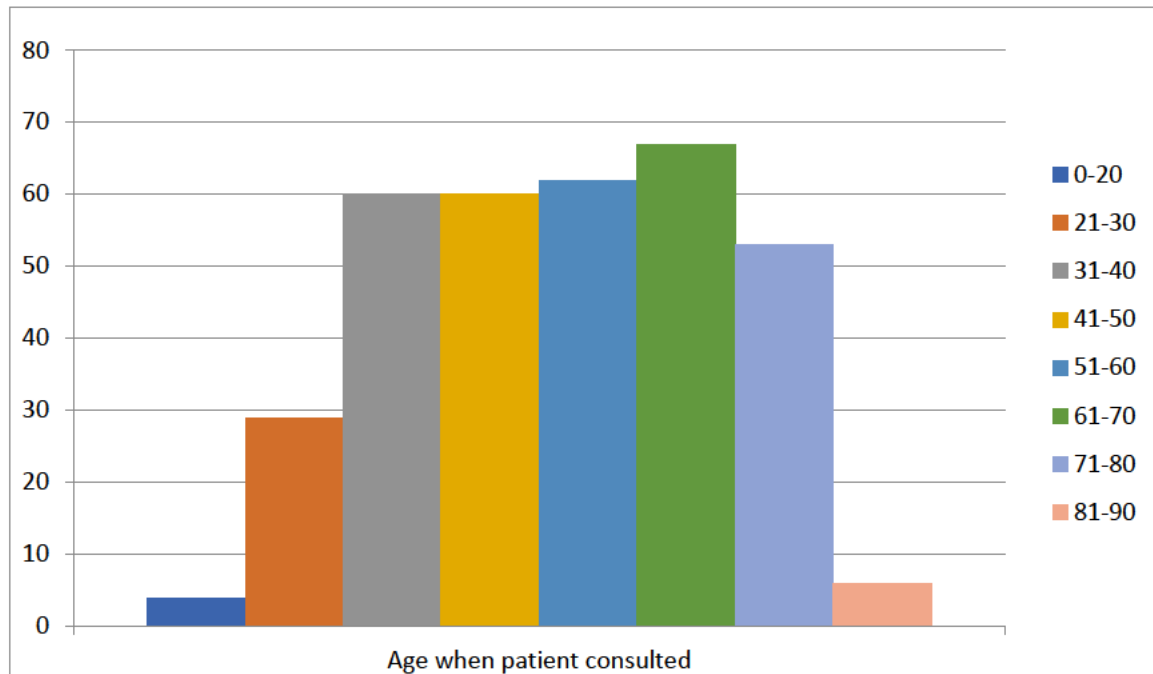
Members practicing traditional acupuncture in Wales were invited to input audit data online relating to the characteristics of patients consulting them, the main and secondary complaints according to ICPC-2 (International Classification of Primary Care - 2nd Edition), and the level of personalised care and lifestyle advice provided.

All data collected was anonymous, both in terms of the acupuncture practitioner and the patient. Data was collected and analysed using Google forms.

A total of **341** responses were received each representing an individual receiving acupuncture during the 4-week period.

Traditional acupuncturists treat significant numbers of key workers and the elderly

- Almost a quarter of patients were key-workers according to the Government definition.
- All adult age groups were well represented, with significant numbers of the over-70s receiving care.
- 79% of patients were female.



Traditional acupuncturists treat a wide variety of medical conditions

The main reasons patients consulted a traditional acupuncturist were:

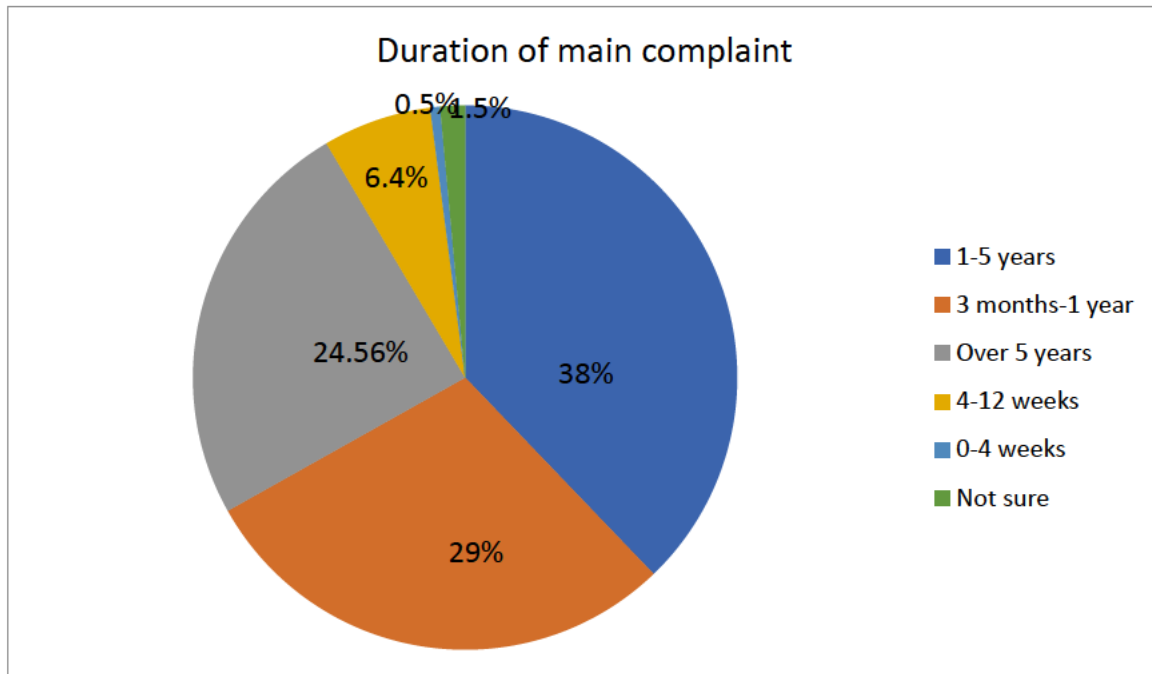
- musculoskeletal, including back, neck and joint pain, rheumatoid and osteoarthritis (n=110)
- psychological, including anxiety, depression and insomnia (n=54)
- neurological, including headaches, migraine, dizziness (n=39)
- fertility, pregnancy and childbearing (n=38)

Patients also consulted acupuncturists to help manage respiratory, urological, digestive, metabolic, and dermatological conditions. In addition, acupuncturists helped patients cope with social problems (including relationship, work, financial, bereavement issues) and trauma.

The majority of patients consulted an acupuncturist to help with more than one condition (n=287). 153 patients sought help with at least two other secondary complaints.

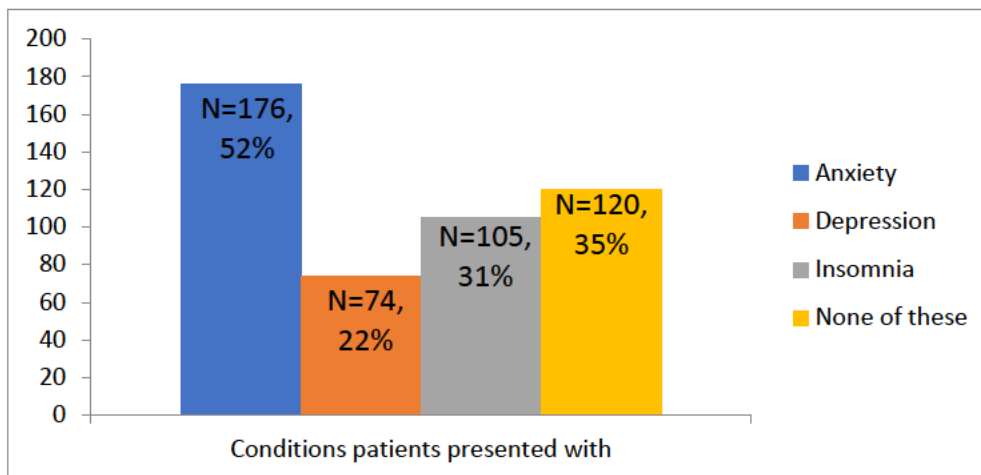
Traditional acupuncturists help people manage long-term conditions

The majority of patients (63%) seek help for a long-term condition that has persisted for more than a year, and for 25% of them it has lasted more than five years. Almost a third of patients were consulting for a condition that they have suffered for between three months and one year.



Half of all patients consulting an acupuncturist were presenting with anxiety

52% of patients presented anxiety and 31% were experiencing insomnia.



This snapshot audit of the work done by traditional acupuncturists has taken place during the Covid-19 pandemic when levels of anxiety in the public may be heightened. Studies have shown that acupuncture is effective in the management of anxiety.^{1,2}

Acupuncture during the Covid-19 pandemic

98% of patients receiving acupuncture during the audit period (the four weeks prior to the firebreak restrictions in Wales in October 2020) had not received a positive diagnosis of Covid-19 infection. A total of seven patients had received a positive diagnosis, with all having had Covid symptoms for a duration of more than nine weeks. The majority had experienced symptoms for more than 12 weeks.

Traditional acupuncture is a valid treatment option for chronic pain

Of the 341 individuals who consulted an acupuncturist during the audit period, 145 reported being in chronic pain (more than 12 weeks duration).

- 14% of patients with chronic pain were receiving opioid medications.

The NICE guideline for *Chronic pain in the over 16s: Assessment and management* recommends that:³

‘Consider a course of acupuncture or dry needling, within a traditional Chinese or Western acupuncture system, for people aged 16 years and over to manage chronic primary pain, but only if the course:

- Is delivered in a community setting, and
- Is delivered by a band seven (or lower) healthcare professional, and
- Is made up of no more than five hours of healthcare professional time (the number and length of sessions can be adapted within these boundaries).’

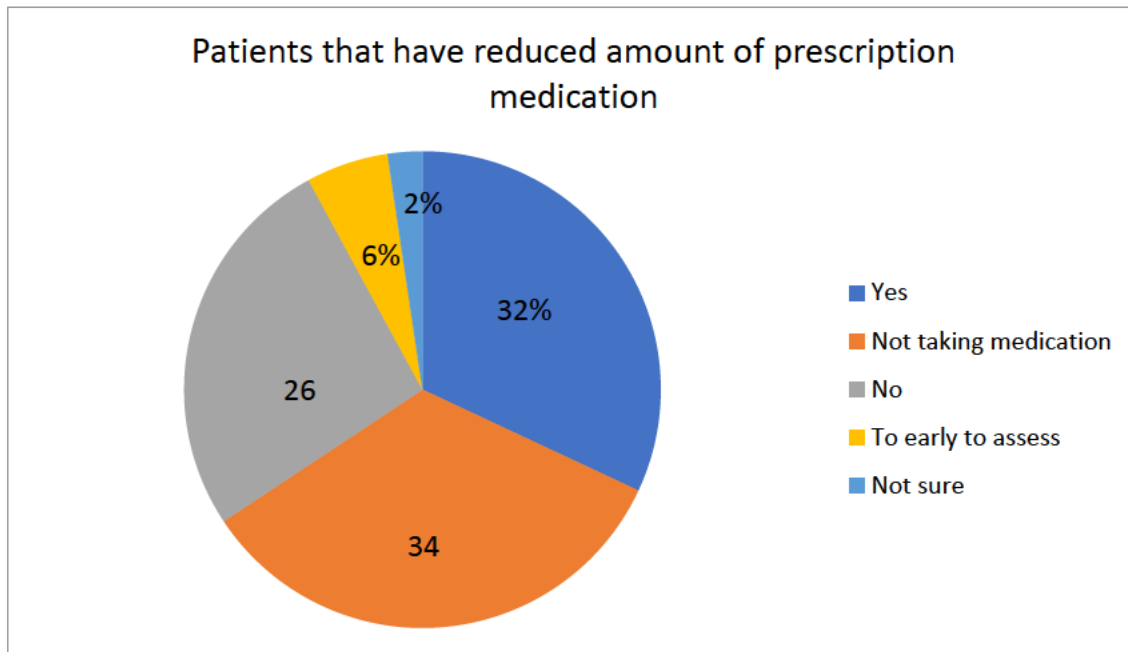
This recommendation was based on the many studies which showed that acupuncture reduced pain and improved quality of life in the short term (three months) compared with usual care or sham acupuncture. Economic evaluations showed that acupuncture is likely to be cost effective in the management of chronic pain.

Patients receiving acupuncture reduce the amount of prescription medication they take

Acupuncture can be used safely alongside medication and is suitable for patients who have complex conditions or take several medications.

In the audit, 55% of patients were taking at least one prescription medication and some were taking several.

- Almost a third of patients had reduced the amount of prescription medication taken during the course of their acupuncture treatment.



Accessibility to traditional acupuncture is limited by ability to pay

Of the 341 patients receiving acupuncture during the period of the audit, 93% paid for the treatment out of their own pockets.

Access to traditional acupuncture is currently restricted to those who can afford to pay the costs. Widening access to patients based on need rather than ability to pay remains a challenge.

Acupuncturists empower patients to keep themselves happy and healthy

Traditional acupuncturists are committed to provide person-centred advice and support to enable patients to make the changes they need to avoid long-term health conditions and live long, happy lives.

- In the snapshot audit, 97% of traditional acupuncturists provided patients with individualised lifestyle advice and support.
- Advice on diet was given to 44% of individuals, 59% received support regarding exercise and a half of all patients received social support, for example advice on relationships, work, finance or bereavement.
- With 31% of patients presenting with symptoms of insomnia, acupuncturists provided advice on sleep habits to 39% of patients.
- Acupuncturists also provided advice and signposting to services for stopping smoking and taking recreational drugs.

Treatment goals that were important to the patient were agreed in 92% of consultations.

British Acupuncture Council members in Wales

As members of the British Acupuncture Council, a professional body registered with the Professional Standards Authority, respondents:

- have completed a minimum of three years training at degree level (Chinese medicine and Western biomedical sciences)
- are among the most highly qualified acupuncturists in the UK
- are fully insured to protect their patients
- have previously been inspected by, and licensed with their local authority, and are to be exempt from the requirement to be licensed under the Public Health (Wales) Act 2017, Part 4 Special Procedures as they are members of an accredited voluntary register (Professional Standards Authority).

Treating patients in the times of Covid-19

British Acupuncture Council members operate safely and lawfully, and follow the safety measures outlined by the British Acupuncture Council and the Welsh Government. They complete a comprehensive risk assessment and ensure that all clinic and procedures are as Covid-19 secure as any healthcare setting.

Conclusion

Over a period of four weeks, traditional acupuncturists in Wales treated a range of medical conditions including pain, anxiety, and insomnia. Acupuncture is an evidence-based medicine with clinical trials demonstrating its effectiveness in these conditions.⁶

People often sought acupuncture for help with long-term conditions and chronic pain. A NICE draft guideline for the management of chronic pain recommends a course of acupuncture based on studies demonstrating effectiveness and cost-effectiveness. The audit revealed that 14% of patients with chronic pain were taking opioid medication. This figure is supported by a retrospective cohort study of UK found that 14.6% of primary care patients with chronic non-cancer pain who were given opioids for the first time became long term opioid users within a year.⁷ Opioids are not recommended for chronic, non-cancer pain in Wales due to the side-effect profile and risk of dependence and addiction.

It is recognised that multimorbidity is frequently compounded by polypharmacy.⁶ During acupuncture treatment, a third of patients reduced the amount of prescription medication they were taking.

Key workers made up almost a quarter of the acupuncture patients, demonstrating its particular value in the current situation. Also significant numbers are elderly, indicating the benefits they perceive at a time when otherwise they might not leave their homes.

A Healthier Wales (2018) sets out the long-term future vision of a 'whole system approach to Health and Social Care' focused on wellbeing and preventing illness which enables everyone

in Wales to live longer, healthier and happier lives, remaining active in their own homes for as long as is practical.⁵ Traditional acupuncture has an important role to play in achieving this vision, by providing effective, individualised care without contributing to polypharmacy. Through ongoing lifestyle advice and treatments to reducing pain levels and improve mental health, acupuncture can help the people of Wales achieve their potential and maximise their wellbeing.

Acupuncturists working in Wales today meet the goals of the *Allied Health Professionals Framework for Wales: Looking forward together* report was published in 2020⁴ as they inspire and enable people to live healthier lives. Acupuncturists provide valuable advice that may reduce the risk of future illness and agree treatment goals that are important to the patient.

The majority of acupuncture treatments are currently provided on a private basis which leads to inequality of access for those in need. The people of Wales could benefit from wider use of this safe, evidence-based medicine and the professional skills of British Acupuncture Council members.

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