

# Acupuncture helps treat drug addicts, doctors report

## N.Y. clinic finds cheap, effective health-care option

By Jeffrey Hoff  
SPECIAL TO THE EXAMINER

NEW YORK — Doctors found cocaine in the blood of Sandra Howard's baby and gave her two options: Travel to the South Bronx for acupuncture treatment or give up her child.

Howard chose to undergo treatment. Five days a week, for three months, she spends 45-minute sessions with four stainless steel needles in each ear.

"I went to any extreme to get crack," she said. "Now I feel much better. Like I am born again."

The young mother is one of more than 200 addicts who show up each day for acupuncture. Men on probation, women whose babies had drugs in their blood and welfare applicants who were told they must become drug-clean are all referred to the city-financed Lincoln Hospital clinic in the South Bronx.

Doctors specializing in addiction treatment are not sure how acupuncture works, but they have learned one thing — it does work. Moreover, it has proved to be cheap and easy to administer.

### \$15 a day

At a time when methadone programs for heroin users have unending waiting lists and inpatient programs for low-income addicts are prohibitively expensive, the Lincoln Hospital clinic accepts about 15 new cocaine or heroin addicts daily. The treatments cost about \$15 a day, and the expense is almost always borne by the city.

"We have a policy: We don't turn anybody away," said Carlos Alvarez, who works with people referred by the city probation department.

The clinic has been offering acupuncture since 1971. Dr. Michael Smith, a psychiatrist who directs the program, is widely credited with promoting the use of this non-Western medical technique for addiction programs.

"I remember being initially skeptical that such an apparently delicate process such as acupuncture could have a real impact on drug addiction. However, 15 years of large-scale clinical experience has persuaded many of us of the popularity and effectiveness of acupuncture treatment," he told the New York City Council last year.

"Acupuncture not only controls withdrawal symptoms and craving, but it also reduces the fears and hostilities that usually disturb drug-abuse treatment settings," he said.

Smith reports that 68 percent of clients referred by the probation department in 1987-88 were drug-

clean for nine weeks. Extensive studies have not been done, but more than half of those who undergo treatment stay drug-free, he said.

### Nothing else works

Addiction specialists agree these accomplishments are significant because virtually no other programs have proved successful in fighting crack addiction. Dr. Graeme Cunningham, chief resident of the Addiction Research Foundation in Toronto, said of other tested treatment programs, "absolutely none" has been able to break addiction to crack, a purified, smokable form of cocaine.

"There is no doubt that over the next few years, acupuncture is going to become an accepted method of treatment, and it is entirely due to his efforts," said Dr. Mindy Fullilove, project director of the Triad Acupuncture Clinic at the Bayview Hunters Point Foundation in San Francisco.

Acceptance has not been universal. The National Institute for Drug Abuse still has not financed any study of acupuncture treatment. Cunningham says that some researchers believe acupuncture works only because patients receive treatment every day.

Fullilove emphasized her confidence in acupuncture. "As a clinician, there is no doubt acupuncture is a successful method in helping people detox. As a researcher, there is a lot to learn."

She is launching a clinical study comparing 75 heroin addicts receiving acupuncture with 75 receiving methadone. Another group of patients will receive placebo acupuncture, or needles placed in points of the body that supposedly have no effect on addiction. She acknowledged that "the concern for Western medicine is that (acupuncture) has yet to be proven. There are a set of questions that desperately need to be answered, and we want our study to do so."

### Some failures

At the South Bronx clinic, most — but not all — patients said the treatment helped. One man, with needle tracks on his hands, said he had been in the program three weeks, but still uses drugs. "It didn't work for me. I am using less frequently, but . . . I walk right out of here, around the corner, that's the crack spot. I can't stop using crack if there it is."

Donald Benbury, a truck driver who had been using cocaine for more than three years, said he began with doubts about the treatment, but has been drug-clean for more than a month. "I thought maybe it was not going to work, because you don't know how it works. It is not going to help a lot of people on crack, because the drug is so strong. But the first day I felt it. It was like a pressure went up and released out the top of my head and I would feel a lot more relaxed."