Neurology, Auriculotherapy, and Medical Education

Gary Stanton, MD

THE NINTH INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM in Auriculotherapy—in Singapore, August 10–12, 2017, and successfully organized by Im Quah-Smith, MD, PhD—advanced auricular acupuncture further as an evidence-based medicine.¹ As a neurologist who practices auriculotherapy and medical acupuncture, my favorable clinical experience and mounting scientific evidence have reinforced my personal commitment to this form of treatment for many of my patients.

However, acupuncture goes beyond the question of “How can I use this type of medicine to help my patients?” It also raises the question of “What can acupuncture in general, and auriculotherapy in particular, teach us about the organization and function of the nervous system?” In addition, “Can the reconciliation of allopathic and traditional concepts of health and disease advance our understanding of neuroscience?”

For example, Paul M.F. Nogier, MD, first theorized that there is a somatotopic organization of the human fetus in the auricle of the ear.² This echoes the scientifically validated organization and inverted orientation of the homunculus in the cerebral cortex as formulated by Penfield.³ Beyond that, we know of other theories of corporal somatotopic organization in the scalp, the hands, the feet, etc.⁴ I—and perhaps others—have wondered if certain treatment principles of traditional Chinese acupuncture⁵ (right points treat left, left points treat right, back points treat front, front points treat back, top points treat bottom, and bottom points treat top) might not correspond to an inverted and 180° axially rotated homunculus that corresponds to the entire body. Such a theory might help explain, for instance, why stimulation of *Bafeng* points in the feet would be used to treat headache.

In auriculotherapy literature, we often read of a theory of ear acupuncture efficacy based upon a holographic organization of the nervous system. According to this theory, layers upon layers of physiologic somatotopic organization exist, in which “a single, small part of the body reflects the whole...”^{4,6,7} Perhaps further neurophysiologic investigation into this theory by means of auricular acupuncture and medical acupuncture might advance the neuroscience of consciousness and behavior.

Given the growing public demand in the United States and elsewhere for safe, effective, and alternative treatments to drugs and surgery, and given the promise of auriculotherapy and acupuncture not only as a response to that demand but also to potentially further our knowledge of neuroscience, it stands to reason that medical education of acupuncture should be promoted. Despite successes, such as our recent symposium mentioned above, there have been setbacks, such as the recent discontinuation of the “Structural Acupuncture for Physicians” Continuing Medical Education course by Harvard Medical School in Boston. How then can we advance the introduction of acupuncture further into medical education?

I have long believed that one way to do this might be by offering medical students some core instruction in the Nogier style of auriculotherapy, particularly in the way it is taught in the University of Paris XI Inter University Diploma (DIU) program.⁸ This program was advanced by my teacher, David Alimi, MD, and is currently directed by my colleague Claire-Marie Rangon, MD, PhD. The reason for believing that this kind of program might be a good point of entry for medical students into acupuncture education is that the concepts and language of Nogier-style auriculotherapy are potentially more familiar to students of allopathic medicine than are the concepts and language of traditional medicine. Examples of the latter include concepts of *Yin* and *Yang*, *Five Elements*, and *Qi*, among others.^{4,9}

Department of Neurology and Sleep Medicine, Emerson Hospital, Concord, MA.

I believe in the value and utility of traditional medicine concepts, and routinely use them in my practice of medical acupuncture. However, such a traditional approach might possibly be less tempting to a medical student, resident, or fellow than the more familiar diagnostic and treatment strategies as well as allopathic medical terms of Nogier-style auriculotherapy. In the University of Paris XI program, emphasis is placed on the scientific aspects of auriculotherapy, with diagnosis and treatment strategies based upon and expressed in modern terms of allopathic medicine. My belief and hope is that, once a student comes to see the value of auriculotherapy, it would only naturally inspire him or her to look further into the world of medical acupuncture, including its traditional concepts.

I have given introductory lectures in acupuncture and auriculotherapy to first-year medical students at Boston University School of Medicine, and, in general, have found them interested and inspired by the prospect of helping their future patients with these methods. I believe that if our medical students—as well as interns, residents, and physicians—are given more opportunities to study auriculotherapy and medical acupuncture, this will not only promote improved patient care, but ultimately might also promote the advancement of our knowledge of neuroscience.

REFERENCES

1. Quah-Smith I, Litscher G, Rong P, et al. Report from the 9th International Symposium on Auriculotherapy held in Singapore, 10–12 August 2017. *Medicines*. 2017;4(3):4030046.
2. Nogier PMF. *The Man in the Ear* [in French]. Maisonneuve: Moulins-les-Metz, France; 1979.
3. Penfield W, Rasmussen T. Sensorimotor Representation of the Body. In: *The Cerebral Cortex of Man*. New York: Macmillan; 1950.
4. Maciocia G. Observation of the Body, Mind, and Complexion. In: *Diagnosis in Chinese Medicine, A Comprehensive Guide*. Edinburgh: Elsevier; 2004:8–9.
5. Deadman P, Al-Khafaji M. Point Selection Methods. In: *A Manual of Acupuncture*. East Sussex, England: Journal of Chinese Medicine Publications; 2001:58–59.
6. Frank BI, Soliman NE. *Auricular Therapy: A Comprehensive Text. Auricular Phases, Frequencies, and Blockages*. Bloomington, IN: Author House; 2005.
7. Pibram KH. Quantum holography: Is it relevant to brain function? *Information Sci*. 1999;115(1–4):97–102.
8. Stanton G, Rangon CM. The Scientific Auriculotherapy diploma program of the Universities of Paris XI and XIII. *Med Acupunct*. 2014; 26(2):118–124.
9. Stanton G. Auricular Acupuncture as an Alternative Medicine. *J Altern Complement Integr Med*. 2017;3:023.

Address correspondence to:

Gary Stanton, MD

Neurology and Sleep Medicine

Emerson Hospital

131 Old Road to Nine Acre Corner

Concord, MA 01742

E-mail: gstanton@emersonhosp.org