Acupuncture and Magnets: Is There a Clinical Role?

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DO MAGNETS HAVE A ROLE in stimulating acupuncture points? A colleague, who is a no-nonsense trauma surgeon, was impressed that magnets placed on Battlefield Acupuncture (BFA) points did reduce pain. The use of magnets is not a new concept as a therapeutic modality in medicine. In fact, magnets date back to the books of Homer, Hippocrates, and Aristotle.¹ Apparently, for more than 2000 years, the effects of magnets on biologic systems have been investigated and debated. Periodically, there is renewed interest in this subject only to dissipate as time goes on.

Whenever I wish to become enlightened about bioelectricity, I reach for two books: (1) *The Body Electric: Electromagnetism and the Foundation of Life*, written by Robert O. Becker, MD, and Gary Selden²; and (2) the second edition of *Bioelectromagnetic and Subtle Energy Medicine*, edited by Paul J. Rosch, MD.³ Becker and Selden modeled acupuncture as the meridians being electrical conductors that carry an injury message (such as pain?) to the brain, which responds by sending back electrical current to stimulate healing in the pathologic area. The acupuncture points can serve as tiny amplifiers to ensure that the very tiny message currents that go back and forth to the brain will be not dissipated by natural resistance along the meridian. The placement of a metal needle into an acupuncture point might drain the minute electrical current into the surrounding fluids and tissue structures that could attenuate the injury message from reaching the central nervous system. However, we know that the combination and placement of several acupuncture needles are beneficial to a patient to enhance healing and perhaps might serve to actually reinforce the injury message to promote healing (see Becker and Selden, pp. 233–236).²

The question arises regarding whether the use of magnets might be helpful in acupuncture practice. I would like to say that we have performed a clinical trial to test this hypothesis, but we have not done so. I and several of my colleagues have observed that placement of 800-G [G for gauss; a measure of magnetic density or flux] magnets on top of inserted Aiguille Semi-Permanente needles or alone just on the BFA points appeared to reinforce the therapeutic benefit of acupuncture. One of my Veterans Administration colleagues wrote me an e-mail stating that he had had moderate success with placing hand magnets during some 7000 BFA procedures in the past 2.5 years (private communication, Steve Mudra, MD, August 23, 2017)!

Coincidentally, I received an article from Bryan L. Frank, MD, entitled, “Biomagnetic Pair Therapy and Typhoid Fever: A Pilot Study,” that appears in this issue of *Medical Acupuncture* (pp. 308–312). My first reaction was “this is not acupuncture.” Nevertheless, I decided to review the research of Isaac Goiz Durán, MD, the inventor of this technique. Dr. Goiz Durán, together with Richard Broeringmeyer, MD, DC, PhD, HMD, stated that a significant number of diseases (presence of viruses, bacteria, fungi, parasites, toxins, and cancers) causes changes in the pH balance in the body. In short, placing N and S poles of two magnets, respectively, in a specific manner causes elimination of the pathogen and restoration of the body’s pH balance, resulting in healing. Apparently, Dr. Goiz Durán has treated many patients and trained numerous physicians from different countries.^{4,5} I tend to keep an open view of therapies outside of my formal medical education. Many areas of integrative medicine combine not only acupuncture, but also include other modalities. Twenty-two years ago, I never would have paid any attention to acupuncture, yoga, essential perfumes, etc., so why not magnet pairs?

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I did a brief review of the acupuncture literature and noted 1 article worthy of mentioning: “Magnets Applied to Acupuncture Points As Therapy: A Literature Review,” by AP Colbert, J Cleaver, KA Brown, N Harling, Y Hwang, HC Schiffke, J Brons, and Y Qin.⁶

Forty-two studies were included in this review (with a total of 6453 participants); there were 21 controlled studies and 21 case series. Sample sizes ranged from 1 to 1500 (most studies involved fewer than 100 participants). Jadad scores for the included controlled studies were poor overall (where reported, the only criterion met was reported randomization). Thirty-seven studies reported a therapeutic benefit of treatment with acu-magnet therapy. One controlled study reported a worsening of symptoms (hot flushes) in the magnet group. Three controlled studies reported no significant between-group differences. The results of 1 study were inconclusive due to its high dropout rate. Hot flushes and skin irritation from adhesives were the only adverse effects reported (2 studies).

So what should we conclude? Perhaps it is best said by Dr. Rosch of the prediction of the late Andrew L. Bassett, MD, (1924–1994 AD) in 1992.³ Dr. Bassett’s view was that, in the diseases to come, it was safe to predict that bioelectromagnetics would assume a therapeutic importance equal to—or greater than—that of pharmacology and surgery today. With proper interdisciplinary effort, significant inroads can be made in controlling the ravages of cancer; some forms of heart disease; arthritis; hormonal disorders; and neurologic scourges, such as Alzheimer’s disease, spinal-cord injury; and multiple sclerosis. This prediction was not “pie-in-the sky.” Pilot studies and biologic mechanisms already described in primordial terms, form a rational basis for such a statement.³

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