

The Safety of acupuncture. Practice in Japan – prospective surveys of adverse events at a national college clinic –

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Background and Objective: We propose two categories of adverse events in acupuncture practice: therapist malpractice, i.e. negligence and/or ignorance, and adverse reactions (or side effects), which are observable in daily standard practice. Malpractice events are generally avoidable, while adverse reactions are not. In published case reports of adverse events in acupuncture, the majority are due to malpractice. Therefore, a review of the literature does not provide enough information to assess the safety of acupuncture in standard practice, since unavoidable adverse events are often not addressed. Also, the incidence of adverse events in Japanese-style acupuncture practices, which use guide tubes and thinner needles, may differ from other countries where TCM-style acupuncture is predominant. Accordingly, we conducted surveys on adverse events from acupuncture at a national college clinic in Japan. In this report we examine the results and discuss the safety of Japanese acupuncture.

Subjects and Methods: We conducted two surveys at the Tsukuba College of Technology Clinic (presently the Center for Integrative Medicine, Tsukuba University of Technology, Japan). In this survey, eighty-four acupuncturists reported cases of adverse events (both malpractice events and adverse reactions) and seven acupuncturists recorded adverse reactions based on meticulous observation and interviews.

Results: For the adverse events, 65,482 treatment sessions were performed over 6 years. Reported events included forgotten needles, ecchymosis/hematoma, burn injuries, discomfort/dizziness, and nausea/vomiting.

For the adverse reactions, 30,338 needle insertions during 1,441 sessions were performed over the course of 4 months. Recorded systemic reactions included malaise (8.2%), drowsiness (2.8%), aggravation of symptoms (2.8%), itchiness in the punctured region (1.0%), dizziness or vertigo (0.8%), and feelings of faintness or nausea during treatment (0.8%). Local reactions included minor bleeding (2.6% of needle insertions), pain on insertion (0.7%), petechia/ecchymosis (0.3%), pains or residual aches in the punctured region (0.1%), and subcutaneous hematoma (0.1%).

Discussion: The results showed that common adverse reactions from acupuncture were transient and mild in standard acupuncture practice in Japan; however, negligent cases, such as forgotten needles, were also frequently found. More effort is needed to reduce the risks due to negligence, such as education, postgraduate training, or some form of incident reporting and feedback system.

Key Words: Acupuncture, Safety, Adverse event, Prospective survey, Japan