

Getting past first pinprick of fear

Acupuncturist offers sessions in honor of Chinese medicine

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The Patent Trader

A brave front wilts quickly at the door to an acupuncturist's office, and an open mind soon fills with second thoughts.

Only a journalist's commitment to a story — and an ego that wouldn't allow for retreat — enabled me to follow through.

Acupuncturist Justin Mandel of Armonk is offering free treatments every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday in October in honor of Chinese Medicine Day, Oct. 24. So in the journalistic spirit of sharing a new experience, I arranged an appointment. I figured my curiosity about the Eastern healing arts and my general skepticism about the medical benefits of getting poked with tiny needles would provide the kind of perspective to which others could relate.

But my spur-of-the-moment approach left little time for contemplating the "puncture" aspect of acupuncture. Luckily for me, Mandel anticipates what new clients are thinking. So we talked a while in advance. Some of my questions stemmed as much from trepidation as from hard inquiry.

"That's actually the one question people usually ask, 'Does it hurt?'" Mandel said.

The answer for most lies somewhere between not at all and no worse than a mosquito bite. But people must be skeptical about this, I countered. After all, even the most open-minded person has to have their doubts the first time through. Translation: "I'm really skeptical about this. Are you sure it works?" Mandel conceded skepticism exists, but added that experience is believing, as I'd soon find out.

My medical history didn't send up any obvious alarms, such as chronic migraines or a desire to quit smoking. That was OK; Mandel's free treatments are actually of the standard stress-relief variety.

Once inside the treatment room, I took off my shoes and socks as instructed, lay back on a cushiony table and relaxed. Or tried to relax, in spite of a shirt and tie, bright fluorescent lights and a busy staff photographer.

"In this case I'm actually like a fisherman," Mandel said as he tapped the first needle into the top



Aaron Houston/The Patent Trader

Licensed Acupuncturist Justin Mandel performs medical chi-kung on reporter Brian Howard to further relax him during his general stress relief treatment Oct. 14 at the Acupuncture Medical Center office in Armonk.

What is Chinese medicine?

Chinese medicine is a system of natural healing made up of several different treatment methods based on the same principles. The most commonly known treatment is acupuncture. Evolved over 2,500 years, Chinese medicine is the oldest, continuously practiced medical system in the world. It focuses on correcting energetic imbalances in a person's chi, or vital energy, by stimulating the body's natural ability to heal itself. Its is used to treat an array of ailments and conditions, including migraines, asthma, addictions to alcohol or tobacco, high blood pressure and depression. Source: Acupuncture Medical Center, Armonk

If you go

Who: Justin Mandel, licensed acupuncturist. A Long Island native, Mandel has a master's degree in Chinese medicine from Pacific College of Oriental Medicine in New York. While studying Eastern philosophy at SUNY Oneonta, Mandel's interests in tai chi and meditation led him to a nearby Chinese medicine clinic, where he spent seven months assisting with treatments.

What: Free treatments by appointment every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday through October to Westchester residents 30 and older. Normally, the fee for treatment is \$100 for the first visit and \$65 thereafter.

Where: Acupuncture Medical Center, 475 Main St., Armonk.

Why: In honor of Chinese Medicine Day, Oct. 24.

Call: 914-646-4545 or visit www.acupuncturemedicalcenter.com.

of my head. "And what I'm doing is I'm fishing for energy."

Visions of that guy from the movie "Hellraiser" came briefly to mind, but I blocked out the thought and focused on my breathing. A needle in each wrist, one in each knee and foot, and that was that. Mandel placed a mask over my eyes, positioned a heat lamp nearby and told me to relax. Alone for a few minutes, my skepticism crept back. Nothing was happening, I thought. Soon, though, I drifted into a sleeplike state. It isn't easy for some people to let go, Mandel would say later. He was right. But I did my best, tuning into the lulling Chinese music playing in the background.

Mandel had described before-

hand five sensations people experience with acupuncture. The first, a slight sharp pain of the needles, is the negative one. So far I was OK with that. The other four, all positive, would be tingling, numbness, heaviness and pressure. I could attest to those.

I don't know if I experienced actual healing from my one brief brush with acupuncture. In truth, I didn't have much that needed healing in the first place. However, I left with a better understanding of why those who turn to acupuncture for relief believe in it. Replacing a little skepticism with a little firsthand knowledge is always a good thing — as is overcoming a fear of the unknown.