



LNP 316

How Does Acupuncture Work?

Michael Max

Kelly: Hi and welcome back to the Legal Nurse Podcast. This is your co-host, Kelly Campbell. Today we have a guest, Michael Max, and he's an acupuncturist.

Welcome, Michael.

Michael: Hi Kelly, how are you today?

Kelly: Good. First and foremost, he is a clinician. He practices Chinese medicine. He loves the study of medicine, learning from others and teaching others, and he also has a podcast. We're in for a treat today, thanks so much for joining us.

Michael: I'm happy to be here. I... You know I love talking about this stuff and you know medicine is cool. I mean, regardless of what kind of medicine you practice, it's such an interesting way to spend the day, you know.

Kelly: No kidding. Now a disclaimer, everyone. I have used acupuncture, so I am a believer. But let's start out by saying and answering what does acupuncture treat?

Michael: What does acupuncture treat? I love that question. I'm so glad you asked that question first. Instead of the question of how does acupuncture work because that just gets into such a kettle of fish. You know it's wonderful to know what something is helpful for. And so, what does acupuncture treat?

It's famous for pain, so lots of people use it for pain. They think... Most folks think it's only for pain but pretty much anything that you would go to see your internal medicine doctor about, you could go see a qualified acupuncturist. So, my day involves seeing people with women's health disorders, menstrual sorts of things, migraine headaches. I treat a lot of digestive issues, psychomotor issues, anxiety, depression, and these kinds of things often respond quite well with acupuncture. Sleep issues, as well. You know, again, anything

that you'd see your regular practitioner for an acupuncturist could probably help you.

Kelly: Okay, now I have used it for pain. My girlfriend has used it for fertility issues.

Michael: Chinese medicine has this like 1,500-year history, like way back from the Tang dynasty. They've been writing books and they've been practicing women's health.

Kelly: Well, that's what I learned while my girlfriend was going through this. I mean, she studied everything before she did anything. So, that was the first I'd learned about it for women's health and then my sister has done it for migraines. So, I was unaware about sleep. Can we touch a little bit on that before we go any further?

Michael: Sure, absolutely. So, with sleep quite often in our conventional medicine world we're looking to try to knock people out if they're having trouble sleeping. We're trying to force their system into a state of sleep. Or if they can't sleep, you just kind of used hypnosis to put them out so even if they're not sleeping. They don't know they're sleeping, right? Drugs like Ambien work that way. But with Chinese medicine, acupuncture and herbs, both are geared not toward sedating somebody or trying to knock them out. It is more geared to regulating their natural circadian rhythms. There's a certain point in the day where you're supposed to be awake, alert, ready to get on with life. There's a certain point in the day you're supposed to be moving toward restfulness and eventually into sleep.

It's a natural cycle that all of us have. Every healthy human being has that. And if that circadian rhythm in some way gets off balance and then it kind of gets stuck in its own homeostatic but imperfect balance, then people have trouble with sleep. And so, the way that we work with sleep is to re-regulate a person's system and then they will naturally want to sleep when it's time to sleep.

Kelly: Interesting. I'm thinking, you know, I'm working with someone that's visually impaired. You know their sleep cycle gets so disrupted and so my mind is thinking that way and that...

Michael: And was their sleep disrupted before they were visually impaired?

Kelly: No, no.

Michael: This came after the visual impairment?

Kelly: Yes.

Michael: That's interesting. Yeah.

Kelly: Yeah and then often the elderly that's... you know their sleep patterns change. So, I'm thinking, "Sleep, okay." I want you to lead this conversation because you're the expert, but I do the physiology of this because acupuncture absolutely helped me. So, you tell me, should we start talking about how acupuncture works and then we talk about the different systems of how it works in the system? Or should I start talking... jump right into how it helps with the GI system?

Michael: Well, let's talk physiology for a moment because I love physiology.

Kelly: Okay, okay. I do too. I think our listeners will too.

Michael: Oh man yeah. I mean, anyone in this trade if you don't love physiology, you're in the wrong business, right?

Kelly: Right.

Michael: Yeah, so I remember studying anatomy and physiology, just you know conventional Western anatomy and physiology as a prerequisite to get into acupuncture school. And I was like in my mid-thirties getting ready to go back to acupuncture school. It was just going to be a second career. And I was so amazed at how all these different tissues and parts differentiate. They do their own thing and yet they work together as this incredible whole. I completely love our conventional Western anatomy, physiology and anatomy. It's just, it's amazing, and it's super helpful. And, of course, in my line of work, you must know this stuff.

The thing about Chinese physiology, Chinese medicine physiology, is that they didn't... they weren't like cutting people up to see how they were put together. They were looking more at function. They were also looking at form to some degree, but they're also looking at how things function. And so, there is a, I'm going to call it Chinese

medicine physiology, that looks at the body through a completely different lens than we use in Western conventional medicine.

There's an overlap. There's a very big overlap, but in a lot of ways there are some things that are very, very different. And so, as we start to broach the question of how does acupuncture work, partly well you first need to look at and understand something.

We're not going to get into all the details, but I just want to let you know how complex it is that we must look at and understand how does the body work from the Chinese medicine point of view. And then as we start to look at that, one of the things that we realized, and this is something Western medicine is just now coming around to, and that is, is that there is no difference between the mind and the body. They are aspects on a continuum, and it can be... You could have something like let's say the... like the liver, for example. You know it's formed. It's a piece of meat in the body, but there's an aspect of the liver that has to do with how you vision your life. There's an aspect of the liver that has to do with kind of how you navigate through things, how you make plans.

Kelly: Really.

Michael: So, there are psycho emotive aspects to all the organs. So, we just call it psychology in conventional medicine, "Oh, it's just psychology you know and we're just looking at the mind" as if it was separate from a body. But with Chinese medicine, we see that the mind and the body are absolutely connected. And while there is organ function like small intestines that are going through peristalsis through our systems as we're speaking right now, there's also a psychomotor aspect to that small intestine. It has a lot to do with how you're able to discern and pull out what's important and relevant and what's not on a psychomotor level.

Kelly: So, "Your gut instinct."

Michael: Dare we say, yeah.

Kelly: Yeah.

- Michael:** I mean, it's fascinating. Even in English, we have these ideas and we have these phrases that point toward what they've been working with in Chinese medicine for thousands of years.
- Kelly:** Right. Okay, just go with me here. Gut instinct is where we've now determined there's serotonin in your intestines and the bacteria and probiotics help with mood now. And there might even be more serotonin importance than in the brain for helping with depression. So that's maybe not new, but...
- Michael:** No, I would say it is new. That's new stuff and when you look at how people are treated with SSRI drugs it kind of takes out the whole idea that the guts are even involved.
- Kelly:** Right and it's at the point where now they're recommending probiotics and that sort of thing with nutrition and that sort of thing. So, let's talk about you had mentioned the liver. Explain that to me because I do understand a little bit now how you're saying whole body. I'm making the connection absolutely this is true "gut instinct." How does the liver work? Can you give me an example?
- Michael:** Oh man. There's a couple of different angles that we can take. I'm going to try to keep this simple here, okay, because I can get kind of Chinese medicine geeky on this.
- Kelly:** Okay. Please do, I'm simple-minded.
- Michael:** Well, I don't think you're simple-minded, but you know let's just say there's a lot of benefit in simplicity.
- Kelly:** True. Very true.
- Michael:** Yeah, so the liver. It's connected to the eyes in Chinese medicine. The liver is connected to the eyes and it's both to the outer vision of being able to kind of see where things are going in your life. Right, there's like an inner vision that we use to like look at who we are and what the world is and where we want to go. A sense of purpose, shall we say? That's all part of the liver.
- What we call liver as an organ you know again in Chinese medicine, liver gān in Chinese, it's that piece of meat, but it's also like I said, the function of being able to see like who we are and where we are, and

where we want to go. It's also very instrumentally connected with a woman's menstrual cycle.

Kelly: The liver is?

Michael: Mm-hmm.

Kelly: Now is that specific to Western medicine because if you look at the others...?

Michael: No, no that's totally Chinese medicine.

Kelly: I was going to say because physiologically I'm drawing a blank here. Remind me. I don't know how that connects them, that and Western.

Michael: Well you know, again, we were talking Chinese physiology. We're looking at certain kinds of function and that's one of the ways when you look at the body through the lens of Chinese medicine, this is one of the connections that we see. Now can we see this from the Western point of view? Yes, we can. The liver is responsible for all kinds of enzymatic and hormonal regulation.

Kelly: Clotting factors and those sorts of things.

Michael: Yeah, so I mean we could make a connection there. You know we could go looking for it and find it.

Kelly: Right, okay.

Michael: But when we're treating with Chinese medicine, we're not thinking the Western aspect of it. We're just working with the physiology as we've come to understand it because that's what our teachers taught us. That's what they learned, and it's what's been passed down and written about.

This is the cool thing about Chinese medicine, you can go... If you know how to read Chinese, you can pick up a book from the Ming Dynasty and understand what doctors were doing back then.

Kelly: Yeah. Well, why do you think there's not more research about it? There's starting to be.

Michael: There's some.

- Kelly:** Because they're starting to cover more and more acupuncture treatments, but why do you think there's not more research?
- Michael:** Well, in China there is a lot, but let's face it in China the research is... What's a nice way to say it? Unreliable at best.
- Kelly:** Okay.
- Michael:** Okay, but we know research can be quite unreliable in the West as well. Often people are looking to prove a narrative rather than to find out, you know what's here. People are often looking to prove a narrative. My suspicion is research costs a lot of money. It takes a lot of time. It's funded by pharmaceutical companies or companies selling medical devices or things like that. I mean you know look where the money's coming from for research. If you're going to do some research and discover that acupuncture might work as well as your favorite antidepressant drug, that would be a problem.
- Kelly:** Yeah. Money talks, huh?
- Michael:** Well, it's just... I mean, we just need to look at how things are funded and who has skin in what game.
- Kelly:** I see.
- Michael:** That's just my opinion.

This is Pat Iyer. As nurses we sometimes feel like we have an excellent grasp of what causes dis-ease, but there is a lot we don't understand about how our bodies handle stress. Any small business owner is prone to stress. I want to share details about something I think is important for every LNC to understand – how your mind and body interrelate to keep you healthy- or sick.



Kay Rice challenges assumptions about Western medicine and presents a different model of thinking: mind-body medicine. She asks us to think about medical care in a way that will help you realize

- why “a pill for every ill” could harm you
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Kelly: Right, okay. All right, the next question. You know when we first started, I said to our listeners, "Disclaimer, I'm a believer. It works for me." Do you have to believe in acupuncture for it to work?

Michael: I love this question.

No more than you must believe in your surgeon for your knee surgery to work and no more than you must believe that if you drop bread it's going to fall buttered side down. You do not have to believe in acupuncture for it to work. In fact, from my perspective, me as an acupuncturist, I don't have to believe in it for it to work. You must know how to use it. I think it's like any other thing. It's a kind of a tool. It's a kind of a method. Of course, it doesn't help everybody because not every medicine helps everybody all the time, right?

Kelly: Right.

Michael: But in terms of belief, and we'll get into this a little more. I want to talk about placebo in a moment. But in terms of belief, no, I don't think you have to believe in it. And furthermore, I encourage people to be skeptical about it.

Those of us in the United States, especially if we didn't come from an Asian family, this was not in our family. We didn't have a grandma who made herbs for us when we were sick. We didn't have an uncle who gave us acupuncture if we didn't feel well. So, as a Westerner if we don't come to it with some skepticism, I think it's kind of a problem.

We should be skeptical. This is not something that's in our culture. While maybe people like you or you know like your friend have used it and it's been helpful, I mean, I think that's great. But anybody who's thinking about using it, I mean, bring your skepticism. Find out how it works for you. I always tell people that they should judge strictly on the results that they get.

Kelly: Right. Yeah, you know I'm thinking back to the very first time I went, and I think I was uncertain. In fact, I'm certain I was uncertain about it.

Michael: You should be. Why wouldn't you? You're smart.

Kelly: I cracked jokes about going and having some needles between my eyebrow.

Michael: You're a smart, intelligent, educated woman. Why wouldn't you be skeptical? Of course, you were.

Kelly: Yeah, I think I did. So, you're right.

Michael: And then what was your experience with your first treatment? What happened to you?

Kelly: I think what made me a true believer was it wasn't the first visit. It was the second or the third visit. I had an adverse effect believe it or not is what made me a believer.

Michael: I love that.

Kelly: Yes.

Michael: "This stuff is really doing something."

Kelly: Yeah, yeah.

Michael: It's powerful.

Kelly: That is exactly what it was. It was on my left side. It felt like I was having shingle pains again you know. But, yeah, it was the adverse effect of it.

Michael: Yes.

Kelly: Feeling alive, "What is going on?" and this was like a day later.

Michael: Yeah. Yeah, any medicine powerful enough to heal is also powerful enough to cause harm if not applied correctly.

Kelly: Yes.

Michael: Absolutely.

Kelly: So, how does acupuncture work? That's a great lead in, how about that?

Michael: Yeah. Okay, so this is a troublesome question. How does it work?

So, there's some different theories from the Western point of view and there's some different ideas from the Chinese medicine point of view. From the Chinese medicine point of view, it's super unsatisfying to the Western mind. Because what we're talking about is that there is a vitality in the body and that there is an intelligence in the body, and it knows how to take care of us.

Kelly: I believe that, absolutely.

Michael: And that can sometimes be compromised. It can sometimes be blocked. It can sometimes be injured. Usually often it's blocked. I mean, it's there. It doesn't know how to do its job. It kind of forgets or it's like a road where you know something washes out and you've got to like reestablish certain kinds of connections. So, acupuncture takes that innate intelligence and kind of wakes it up. And often what it will do is redirect it and that's part of how it wakes it up. It will redirect it.

Yeah, I think that's all I want to say about that without getting into a whole bunch of you know Chinese blahbity-blah because I just don't think that's helpful.

I would say at this point, and I've been doing this for 20 plus years now... Yikes, 20 plus years. It's spooky.

Kelly: I know.

Michael: I know, yeah.

I would say it's this point that what it does is it... Often what will happen is people will fall into a deep quietude. They call it sleep. I think it's something other than sleep. People often really settle into the treatment. I think what the acupuncture does is it pulls out, it wakes up, it brings out that part of us that knows how to heal us. There's something in us that knows how to take care of us. It is innate in every single one of us and acupuncture kind of wakes it up. It's like it drops us into a coherence, and we come out and go, "Oh yeah, right. I know how to do this." I mean, it's not a conscious thing. It's not conscious at all. People just feel better. I mean, they'll get off my table and say, "Wow, I haven't felt like that since my car accident."

Kelly: Yeah, your body does have an ability to heal itself. Now, here's a question. You know for healing my understanding is you must have...It goes...Is median the right word that it goes down? Median?

Michael: You could say meridian or channel.

Kelly: Meridian, that's the word.

Michael: Yeah, they call it Meridian. In Chinese, they call it a jīngluò.

Kelly: Okay.

Michael: But you could use the word meridian in English.

Kelly: Okay, okay, jīngluò. So, what happens if at the nerve in English is buried in your bone and you're wanting to reach beyond that meridian, jīngluò or nerve. Can you reach beyond that?

Michael: Ready for this?

Kelly: Yes.

Michael: I'm not interested in nerves at all.

Kelly: Really?

Michael: Uh-uh.

Kelly: Okay.

Michael: I mean, nerves are part of it, but it doesn't happen because of the nerves. Okay, so this is where it gets weird. I try not to get weird here, but you just invited me, so here we go. These jīngluò, the acupuncture channels, these invisible channels of energy. First, you may have seen the acupuncture charts where it looks like a line on the body.

Kelly: Yes.

Michael: They're not lines. They're more like watersheds. Imagine looking at how a river meanders through a landscape. These meridians are more like rivers, and they work more like hydraulics than they do electricity.

Kelly: Okay.

Michael: Okay and there is a vitality that runs through them, right? In Chinese they call it the Qi which is an impossibly difficult word to translate, so I'm not even going to try. I'm just going to call that vitality.

Kelly: Okay.

Michael: Okay, so these meridians, these so-called meridians. And you know a lot of people would roll their eyes because they go, "Well, we're doing a dissection, or I don't see any meridians here." Well, first, you're not going to find them on a dead person. It's a little bit like house hardware and software work together. Your computer will work when it's booted up, partly because there's hardware, but there's software running on that hardware. And I think the meridian system is the software that's running on the hardware. If there's no life in the body...

Kelly: Right, kind of like your body and your spirit, right?

Michael: Yeah, kind of like that.

Kelly: Okay, all right.

Michael: I would make that jump. I would buy that.

Kelly: Okay, go ahead.

Michael: Yeah. So, you know there was a new organ that was recently found, air quotes "found", last fall called the interstitium. Did you hear about this?

Kelly: No, I did not.

Michael: Yeah, acupuncturists were keen on it. So, it's in the fascia and it's something that's been missed for a long time because once you have a cadaver that's not fresh, that's been dried out, so to speak, the interstitium disappears. You must have a certain amount of fluid in it for you even to be able to find and recognize this level of the connective tissue.

Kelly: Interesting.

Michael: Now the Chinese have this organ they call the sanjiao, the triple burner. They call it the organ that has a function but no form. It's responsible for the waterways and pathways in the body. The interstitium moves lots of fluid through your connective tissue.

Kelly: Interesting.

Michael: Okay and the jīngluò are intimately connected with this interstitium stuff that they recently found

Kelly: Interesting. No wonder.

Michael: Pretty cool, huh?

Kelly: Yes, absolutely. Well, you know what, our time is almost up.

Michael: And we just got started. This has been great.

Kelly: I know, I know. So, how do we continue learning from you? How do we tap into your knowledge? Let our listeners know where we can find you.

Michael: Okay, so I've got a couple of things.

Kelly: Sorry listeners, time went so fast.

Michael: Okay, so I've got a few things. I've got two podcasts. One is up and live and current, and the other I retired last November. I'm going to tell you that one first because it's for the general public. It's called "Everyday Acupuncture Podcast."

Kelly: Say it again.

Michael: "Everyday Acupuncture Podcast" and it's for the general public. It is conversations with acupuncturists using as plain of English as we can to talk about Chinese medicine for those who are interested in learning something about it, to see if it might help them or just because they're interested. And there's 80 plus episodes up there. I set out to make a library of useful information. I think I accomplished that after three and a half years. So, if you're new to Chinese medicine or you want to know something about it, "Everyday Acupuncture Podcast" is a good one to go to.

Now I've got a new one called "Qiological Podcast".

Kelly: Spell that please.

Michael: Q-I-O-logical, Q-I-O-L-O-G-I-C-A-L dot com, www.qiological.com. This is a super geeky podcast that is for the acupuncture profession. So, you know we get deep in the weeds on that podcast. So, if you're a civilian you might find it boring, but if you want to see what acupuncturists sound like when they're talking to each other, www.qiological.com.

Kelly: Okay, great.

Michael: And then I have a clinical practice and you can find that at www.yongkangclinic.com. That's Y-O-N-G-K-A-N-G-clinic dot com. A lot of information there for my patients. So, again, people interested in learning something about Chinese medicine, lots of stuff over there about how Chinese medicine can help you with your health. That's my clinical website.

Kelly: Okay, great and more procedures and diseases are allowing acupuncture by insurance companies.

Michael: Yeah, insurance companies want to save money.

Kelly: Yeah.

Michael: Acupuncture is cheap, not much in the way of side effects unless someone really messes up and flares up your shingles.

Kelly: Well, you know what it only lasted like a day or two. I mean, I went back and I'm obviously still a believer and I have my own, but that's what really got my brain ticking like, "Oh my gosh, this is real stuff."

Michael: Yeah, it can be quite surprising.

Kelly: Absolutely. Well, thank you for your time today.

Michael: Thanks, this has been great.

Kelly: I love the conversation. Thanks. All right listeners, tune in again next week and don't forget to like us. Bye-bye.

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