



Off Duty

By Molly McKenna, PhD

I think the first needle that popped out of my ear was the most startling – I believe I actually heard it jump from the curl of my upper ear, landing gently on my sleeve. Of course, I asked if this was normal, for acupuncture needles to suddenly pop out of a patient. Dr. Stephen Saeks assured me that yes, when the energy changed enough, sometimes needles just release and can fall out. In fact, he commented, during one of his own treatments in the past, he managed somehow to send a needle flying out of his ear part-way across the room.

Reassured, I replaced my hands in my lap and made every attempt to take advantage of the relaxation treatment Dr. Saeks had agreed to demonstrate on me. After all, once I had interviewed him about his experience as a psychologist who had taken his longstanding interest in Traditional Chinese Medicine, and incorporated it into and expanded his clinical practice, I was very curious about how this could work. He offered me the chance to experience a little of his treatment first-hand. Rather than just let him stick a few needles into my ear and then act like it was really neat and then go about my business, I thought I should try to actually benefit from the treatment like an actual client would. In retrospect, talking nonstop with Dr. Saeks about his interest and training after the needles had been inserted probably interfered pretty significantly with the effects of the treatment. But in the end, I'm not sure it did, actually – after I managed to eject two more needles from my ear and about twenty minutes had passed, he removed the remaining needles and I went about my day. Something did feel different. But more about that later.

Dr. Stephen Saeks, a psychologist and traditional Chinese medicine practitioner, works in private practice in Beaverton. His practice is 2 Roads Crossing Healthcare, a name which, in Chinese, contains the idea that the two paths don't just intersect, they continue on together. A rough translation might be, "when two work together, the result is success." Dr. Saeks says he especially likes this name because he feels it emphasizes two things about his practice – the importance of the therapeutic alliance in treatment, and the interaction between Eastern (Chinese medicine) and Western (psychotherapy) modes of care.

In 1975, Dr. Saeks was studying martial arts, through which he became good friends with his instructor. One day, while working out together, he sustained a very deep bruise; his instructor responded by pulling out a brown bottle and pouring some type of liquid on the bruise, telling Saeks that it would help. Sure enough, two to three days later, the bruise was healed. Saeks was impressed at the "amazing, yet natural" ability of this liniment. He asked his instructor what this liquid was, and his instructor would only tell him that it was Chinese martial-arts liniment. From that time forward, Saeks says he was intensely curious to discover what this liniment was and how it worked, but he struggled to find information in English on Chinese medicine. Several years later, while in graduate school in Hawaii, Dr. Saeks met a Chinese herbalist who let him freely spend time in his store, learning about how Chinese herbal treatments worked. Yet this exploration only whetted his appetite to learn more about Chinese medicine.

While working at the Menninger Clinic in Kansas, in the Professionals in Crisis program, Dr. Saeks found that a large number of their clients were using alternative health treatments and felt that the treatment staff didn't have a strong understanding of what additional services their clients were really getting. He offered to research these treatments for the staff and delved deeper into learning about such approaches such as acupuncture, particularly as it related to addictions and severe emotional problems. His strong interest in discovering more about what non-western approaches had to offer in treating the variety of disorders traditionally dealt with in clinical psychology continued. Therefore, it was no real surprise that when Dr. Saeks and his family -moved to Oregon, he couldn't resist the pull of the Oregon College of Oriental Medicine.

Dr. Saeks enrolled in OCOM's pro-gram in Traditional Chinese Medicine to find it to be "a full-on medical school," with a corresponding workload in the multi-year program. While continuing to work teaching and consulting in clinical psychology, he entered the school as a student only. Especially with faculty, Dr. Saeks sought to leave behind his title as clinical psychologist and learn this new field from the student level up. He commented that making the shift from clinical psychology, with its emphasis on boundaries and space between provider and client, to the type of hands-on treatment required in acupuncture and massage took some adjustment. His "living anatomy"

class, in which he learned to work palpating and manipulating the physical bodies of real people, was notably difficult, not only for the content of the material to be learned about the human body, but in part because of the challenge of learning how to approach clients with touch rather than only with words.

During his training Dr. Saeks was continually evaluating how he could put together his new skills in Chinese medicine with his work in clinical psychology with therapy clients. He completed his degree through OCOM and has become a licensed acupuncturist. Presently, he describes his clinical work as including three types of treatments: 1) straight Chinese medicine, with use of acupuncture and herbal treatments; 2) straight Western psychotherapy; and 3) a blended approach using moderate amounts of acupuncture with psychotherapy clients.

Dr. Saeks stresses that when he uses acupuncture with therapy clients, delineating the boundaries and structure of treatment is very important. He builds a working alliance with clients, focusing on the collaborative nature of treatment, typically in an emotion-focused cognitive-behavioral mode, and then discusses how acupuncture might enhance treatment. With these clients, he does acupuncture only with points from the elbow to the fingers, and on the scalp, face and ears, so that treatment does not require disrobing, and can be conducted with the patient in a seated position. He indicates that he is very careful in obtaining consent and being specific about what treatment will and will not involve, especially assuring that clients have realistic expectations about what acupuncture will add to their treatment. Dr. Saeks has found this type of treatment to be beneficial with clients who struggle with issues such as anxiety and addictions.

Since completing his work as a student, Dr. Saeks has returned to OCOM as an instructor teaching a course on the patient-treater relationship. He uses his clinical psychology experience and lots of role-playing exercises to instruct Chinese medicine students on how to work with patients with different personality styles, as well as understand basic transference and countertransference issues. He has also taught a module on psychological diagnoses, developing and maintaining the therapeutic alliance, and patient management in an acupuncture treatment setting, in the OCOM doctoral program. Dr. Saeks is very clear that he still prefers the clinical psychology approach to a Chinese medicine approach in working with clients with psychological difficulties/issues; for example, he states that he is unwilling to use only acupuncture or herbs as a primary treatment for a client with anxiety or depression. However, he is currently developing his own treatment models for a variety of psychological conditions that integrate the two approaches.

He also discussed using specific Chinese exercises (Qi Gong) to help reduce anxiety. He thinks that such exercises plus acupressure, could be employed to help clients with PTSD learn to calm themselves, thereby helping to empower them. This in turn could help these individuals not only better manage anxiety in their daily lives, but within the psychotherapy process as well.

In April, Dr. Saeks begins working at the Oregon Health & Science University Women's Health Center Integrative Medicine Program as part of a multi-disciplinary, integrated team that will treat women with cancer. In his role as the psychologist, he will conduct psychotherapy with women in the program, and, he will also be available to back up the primary acupuncturist when the need arises. His curiosity about the mysterious Chinese liniment also persists. In his practice, he maintains an interest in traumatology and the application of herbal medicine to healing physical injuries. A tour of his office included an herbal dispensary with numerous large jars filled with a variety of intriguing herbal, animal and mineral substances. Dr. Saeks says that he has developed his own liniment recipe that he finds to be effective with "stagnation" injuries such as bruising, swelling, and strained ligaments. In this therapy, the application of extracted herbs, typically at the site of the injury, increases the circulation of both qi and blood. This treatment helps energy to move more freely throughout the body, reducing "stagnation" that can manifest through pain and inflammation. Dr. Saeks also mentions the use of teas and ingested herbal treatments as approaches that he uses with clients.

So back to my jumping ear needles. The type of treatment that Dr. Saeks demonstrated on me uses only points in the ear, in which different parts of the ear correspond to different parts of the body. By focusing on the ear, he can target specific parts of the body, from internal organs such as the lungs or spleen, to external ones such as the skin. One frequently used and very powerful application of ear acupuncture, is to help one achieve a deeply relaxed state. While I sat in his office, chatting about his practice, I could feel shifting sensations in my ear like warmth, mild pinching, small centers of tension, and at times, not much of anything, which surprised me. Despite talking through much of the experience, I was still able to focus on a feeling of calm and flow which wasn't limited to my ear. I

have to admit, part of me was a little nervous-after all, there was a cluster of small needles stuck in my ear-but I still felt an increase in my ability to attend to the specific situation and focus entirely on what was happening right in front of me with little distraction. After we finished, I went about my regular day, but with an enhanced sense of calm and overall awareness. It made me consider whether acupuncture for relaxation, as a regular practice, might be a good addition to my own self-care. And all this from four needles in my left ear alone!

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