

Acupuncture for chronic pain and depression in primary care: a programme of research

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Declared competing interests of authors: Mark Sculpher reports grants from the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) during the conduct of the study and personal fees from various pharmaceutical and other life science companies outside the submitted work. Andrea Manca reports grants from NIHR during the conduct of the study. Beth Woods reports grants from the NIHR during the conduct of the study.

Published January 2017

DOI: 10.3310/pgfar05030

Plain English summary

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Programme Grants for Applied Research 2017; Vol. 5: No. 3

DOI: 10.3310/pgfar05030

NIHR Journals Library www.journalslibrary.nihr.ac.uk

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Increasing numbers of people are seeking acupuncture treatment for various conditions. However, we do not yet know how effective acupuncture is or if it provides value for money. By studying all of the available research, we should be able to reduce uncertainty about these issues and provide clear evidence for decision-makers. We aimed to provide high-quality evidence about the use of acupuncture for chronic pain from existing data and to develop fresh evidence on the use of acupuncture for depression.

We used systematic processes to combine and interpret data from high-quality clinical trials of acupuncture involving approximately 18,000 patients. The types of pain investigated in these trials were neck and lower back pain, osteoarthritis of the knee, headache and migraine. We found acupuncture to be more than simply a placebo as it was more effective than sham acupuncture, with sham acupuncture consisting of needling that did not penetrate the skin or needling at the wrong points. Acupuncture was also found to be better than standard medical care for all of these chronic pain conditions. In another analysis, we compared acupuncture with other physical therapies for osteoarthritis of the knee and found acupuncture to be one of the more clinically effective therapies and, when based on high-quality trial evidence, also cost-effective. When all trials were analysed, transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation was cost-effective. We also conducted a large-scale clinical trial of acupuncture or counselling for depression in which we found both interventions to be clinically effective and acupuncture to be cost-effective. Counselling was also cost-effective where acupuncture was contraindicated or unavailable.

Drawing together this evidence provides high-quality information on the effect of acupuncture for patients with chronic pain or depression, offers directions for further research and gives health-care providers and policy-makers an opportunity to consider if wider access to acupuncture is appropriate and cost-effective.

Programme Grants for Applied Research

ISSN 2050-4322 (Print)

ISSN 2050-4330 (Online)

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This report

The research reported in this issue of the journal was funded by PGfAR as project number RP-PG-0707-10186. The contractual start date was in April 2009. The final report began editorial review in February 2015 and was accepted for publication in January 2016. As the funder, the PGfAR programme agreed the research questions and study designs in advance with the investigators. The authors have been wholly responsible for all data collection, analysis and interpretation, and for writing up their work. The PGfAR editors and production house have tried to ensure the accuracy of the authors' report and would like to thank the reviewers for their constructive comments on the final report document. However, they do not accept liability for damages or losses arising from material published in this report.

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