

HEAD TO HEAD

Commentary: I was pregnant, in pain, and desperate when I chose acupuncture

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Eighteen months ago I developed severe pelvic girdle pain when pregnant with my second child. I had this condition in my first pregnancy, when it was successfully managed with physiotherapy and manipulation. However, this time it was much more severe and did not respond to the same treatment.

I reduced physical activity, did daily core stability exercises, and wore a sacroiliac support belt, but my mobility deteriorated precipitously. Walking became so difficult I needed crutches and a wheelchair. Sitting and even lying for too long on either side was painful. I could no longer work and became practically housebound. My physiotherapist felt she could do no more for me. In desperation I saw two other therapists, but with no relief. My obstetric team offered me an elective caesarean section as early as possible, but there was nothing more they could do.

This realisation was devastating. I felt abandoned and let down, and I was terrified about how I would cope with the rest of the pregnancy. There are few safe options for pain relief in pregnancy: anti-inflammatory drugs are contraindicated and opioids can cause neonatal abstinence syndrome. I took paracetamol and codeine, desperately hoping that I would not need anything stronger.

I looked at non-drug options for pain control. A TENS (transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation) machine gave mild temporary relief. Then I recalled seeing a physiotherapist for low back pain a few years ago, who had used acupuncture alongside manual therapy. I knew that acupuncture is widely used to treat many types of pain and has few adverse effects. After discussion with my physiotherapist, I booked a session at a local private physiotherapy clinic.

I was reassured that the practitioner was a trained physiotherapist who had experience of my condition. She said that in theory acupuncture could trigger premature labour but that little

evidence supported this. After examining me carefully, she gently inserted needles into tender points in the gluteal muscles and pelvic girdle. She also needled a point near my ankle that is supposed to trigger relaxation. After the tiny prick of the needles entering I felt a warm tingling sensation that was rather pleasant. The needles were left in for 15 minutes, during which she occasionally rotated them. The session lasted half an hour and cost £45 (€51; \$62). I was advised to limit driving afterwards and to rest if possible. On returning home I slept for two hours.

I saw her weekly until delivery. Overall I felt a small reduction in pain, but crucially I did not need to increase my analgesia throughout the rest of the pregnancy. I also found the treatments relaxing. Perhaps, most importantly, I felt cared for. It was therapeutic to see an empathic professional on a regular basis who had the time to listen, who understood my pain, and who was trying to relieve it.

At a time of great physical and mental suffering, when I had exhausted all avenues offered by conventional medicine, acupuncture offered me hope. I am fortunate that I was in a financial position to afford it. Women with pelvic girdle pain have to strike a difficult balance between controlling their pain and risking harm to their child. In this situation, there seems to be a clear role for a safe and potentially effective treatment such as acupuncture to help both mother and baby.

Competing interests: I have read and understood BMJ policy on declaration of interests and have no relevant interests to declare.

Provenance and peer review: Commissioned; not externally peer reviewed.

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