

Acupuncture Study Brings Hope For Parkinson's Disease Patients

By Brenda Duran, Senior Associate Editor

For people living with Parkinson's disease, the future is full of obstacles and uncertainty.

This is the sole reason the second most prevalent neuro-degenerative disease that affects about 1 million people in the U.S., and 5 million worldwide has researchers constantly on the hunt for not only a cure, but also a way to improve the quality of life for patients.

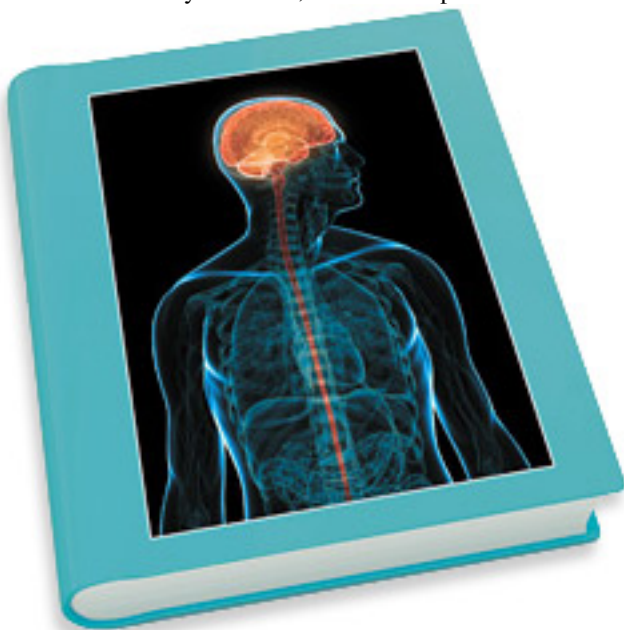
By the year 2013, a current research study involving acupuncture is hoping to find answers for Parkinson's disease patients living with one of the most debilitating side effects – fatigue.

The research study funded by the Michael J. Fox Foundation for Parkinson's Research is currently determining whether alternative Eastern medicine, specifically acupuncture, can help alleviate symptoms of severe fatigue in those living with Parkinson's.

The foundation, which was established in 2000 by actor Michael J. Fox, is the largest funder of Parkinson's research in the world. The organization has funded over \$270 million in targeted Parkinson's research to date including the latest study on acupuncture.

Dr. Benzi Kluger, assistant professor of neurology and psychiatry at the University of Colorado Hospital has been leading the study, which began in November 2010. The study is being conducted as a double-blind study to find whether acupuncture has a significant effect on Parkinson's patients living with fatigue in their daily lives.

"Western medicine does not have good treatment for fatigue," said Kluger. "Fatigue for patients with Parkinson's is really different, it doesn't improve with rest and is very disabling."



Fatigue affects approximately half of all Parkinson's disease patients. Many of them do not get relief from medication and research has now focused on ancient Eastern medicine such as acupuncture to find answers, said Kluger.

"We wanted to see if we can come up with alternative strategies that can also later help people with other neurological disorders in the future," said Kluger.

Kluger approached the Parkinson's foundation with his study because he said he was interested in non-motor systems in Parkinson's patients. Non-motor symptoms are the most common symptoms that develop first in patients and one of them is fatigue.

Jamie Eberling, associate director of research programs at the Michael J. Fox Foundation for Parkinson's Research said Kluger's study was chosen based on its merits and because it was something of interest to their donor base.

"We are always interested in different types of approaches," said Eberling. "We are always open to new things, we wish we could see more of these types of studies being presented."

The foundation in the past has funded studies on exercise and even singing for speech problems as well as dancing for motor impairment in Parkinson's disease patients. They review 800 grant proposals a year and are currently supporting more than 300 research projects in industry, academia and government.

Kluger's acupuncture study has a total of 22 patients participating right now. The goal is to have 90-100 patients by the study's end date in 2013.

Patients who joined the study initially came in for a screening visit and filled out a questionnaire about fatigue and their beliefs about acupuncture and alternative medicine. Once people were screened into the study, they were randomized with twice weekly sham or real acupuncture.

Patients in the study are blindfolded while they are receiving acupuncture treatment and Kluger said he doesn't know which patients are receiving acupuncture treatment and which patients are receiving placebo. Three acupuncturists have been working on the study subjects placing needles in acupuncture points on the patient's face and back. For patients who are in the placebo group, the acupuncturists may place non-penetrating needles in spots that aren't typical acupuncture spots.

Kluger said in the spring, his team is going to try to shell out a paper on the sham acupuncture after spending a lot of time learning how to remove the sham needles to create a really good placebo procedure. So far, Kluger said he has seen dramatic improvement in fatigue in some of the study subjects. "People have gone back to doing activities that they haven't done in years," he said. Since the statistical data is not yet completed, Kluger said he wouldn't know which group has benefitted the most.

Kluger noted that a large majority of Parkinson's disease patients already use a form of alternative medicine – acupuncture, massage, herbs and chiropractic care, but until now, there weren't many evidence-based studies to determine whether acupuncture is effective for symptoms such as fatigue.

The neuro-degenerative disease affects between 1 percent and 2 percent of people over the age of 65. Those diagnosed with the disease will lose neurons in specific parts of the brain, affecting muscle movement and control over time.

Kluger said if he finds that acupuncture can be used as an alternative form of medicine to alleviate the symptoms of severe fatigue, it might help insurance companies extend their coverage of the treatment.

"We will also be able to see if acupuncture would be effective for people with other diseases like cancer and MS (Multiple Sclerosis)," Kluger said.

Focusing most of his medical career in Western medicine, Kluger said he has really enjoyed doing research on Eastern medicine and finding out about the potential it has to heal people.

"For me it has been a wonderful opportunity to work with acupuncturists to really start to delve into acupuncture. One of my goals is to come out of it with an open mind," he said. "It's been really fun to explore alternative ways to help these patients. We are hopeful."

If you would like to know more about the study or would like to refer a patient, please contact Etta Abaca, Research Coordinator at etta.abaca@ucdenver.edu or call 303-724-2193.