

Don't throw the baby out with the research paper

Sarah Budd

Only 44% of women giving birth in England now have normal births, a drop of nearly 15% over the last 10 years. (Hum. Reprod.2002) This is alarming news, and one wonders what the future of childbirth is to be?

There are endless articles on best practice in health care.. the term is now a common expression in the field of health, often referred to in government documents and reports, although it originated in business management. Orb (2001) says of a definition of best practice that the one word encapsulating it is 'quality' The interest of health professionals in developing best practice models comes from the urgency of healthcare institutions to offer quality and continuous improvement of the services provided.

It is not static, which is why one would hope that initiatives are proposed and put in place to improve not only quality but also choice. Other popular terms such as evidence based medicine, evaluation, outcomes can seem daunting to those wishing to implement a new service such as acupuncture. This is where the chicken and the egg come in! There is insufficient research evidence on obstetric acupuncture at this time to satisfy the evidence-based requirements of many. There is however a certain amount of experience and empirical evidence that acupuncture has a tremendous amount to offer pregnant women particularly in the ante natal period. Trust was the key for us in Plymouth, that and open-minded obstetricians. So if one is in a position to build up a wealth of patient numbers, one can then look at retrospective data and outcome studies, and think about prospective studies. However, if coming into the field without this background, then is it fair to just rely on the fairly limited research that exists, in order to present a proposal? What of all the conditions of pregnancy which we know respond well to acupuncture, yet for which there is no research available?

The majority of research pertaining to obstetric acupuncture and acupressure is related to sickness in pregnancy. Dundee (1988) talks of the interest in acupuncture for sickness coming about when one of the co-authors of his paper saw the technique used in China! Dundee (an anaesthetist) then went on to conduct various studies particularly on the use of the point "Neiguan" or Pericardium 6. These in turn led to numerous other studies.

Another area of obstetric acupuncture which has attracted a certain amount of research interest is induction of labour and to some extent the influence of acupuncture on the length of labour. Rabl (2001) looked at a group of 45 women, and the effect of acupuncture for cervical ripening and induction of labour at term.

The influence which trials such as these, may or may not have on informing best practice will be discussed, and hopefully will stimulate further debate.