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# Veterans in Wisconsin Try Acupuncture as an Alternative to Narcotics

By ERIN TONER • APR 2, 2015



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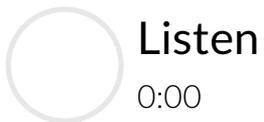
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*Ron Gronitz relaxes during a treatment at the Milwaukee Veterans Accupuncture clinic in Waukesha.*

ERIN TONER



During emotional hearings about the alleged overprescription of narcotics at the Tomah VA hospital (<http://wuwm.com/post/2-congressional-panels-probe-opiate-prescriptions-wis-va-hospital>), many who testified noted there are safer ways to treat pain.

One treatment mentioned was acupuncture.

Larry Burt sought out the needle therapy at a clinic in Waukesha that's helping veterans reduce their use of narcotics. Burt, 68, is one of many vets struggling with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. He's also been hooked on alcohol, cigarettes and chewing tobacco.

To fight his addictions, the Vietnam-era veteran took pills and underwent hypnosis, but they didn't work.

"So I'm hoping this acupuncture will eliminate my cravings," Burt says.



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*Larry Burt, 68, uses acupuncture to treat addiction.*

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Burt closes his eyes as an acupuncturist places five tiny needles into his left ear and then five in his right ear. He doesn't even wince. As soothing music comes on, we leave Burt to relax at the Milwaukee Veterans Acupuncture clinic in Waukesha. If it's anything like his past treatments here, he'll be fast asleep in minutes.

While some are skeptical that acupuncture works, a study the Journal of the American Medical Association published in 2012 found the practice effective at easing chronic pain. The military uses it to treat wounded soldiers on the battlefield, and the VA now covers acupuncture for veterans back home.

Christine Jablonski, the nurse and certified acupuncturist who started the Waukesha clinic, says she's seen the practice relieve patients' pain, addiction or anxiety to the point where some no longer need prescription drugs.

"If somebody has arthritis in their knees, it's not going to cure them, but can it make the difference in how much medication they need? I've had patients, real elderly patients tell me, I'm only 30 percent better maybe, but it's a difference between a cane and not a cane. That's good. So sometimes it helps kind of around the edges," Jablonski says.

Dr. John Vondrell is a retired anesthesiologist who volunteers at the Waukesha clinic.

"It's not the answer by itself. It's something you work with other things. But you normally don't need narcotics for a lot of this stuff," Vondrell says.

Vondrell says he's disappointed, but not surprised, by what's alleged to have gone on at the Tomah VA.

Some patients reportedly called the hospital "Candyland" because of how easy it was to get pills.

“The people come in demanding something for pain, their discomfort. And the only thing that we as physicians really have is pain medications and tranquilizers, other than if they used alternative type therapy, which is usually not available, they really don’t have any other option to get rid of pain other than narcotics,” Vondrell says.

NPR reported (<http://wuum.com/post/growing-number-veterans-struggles-quit-powerful-painkillers>) that Americans in the military are prescribed narcotic painkillers three times as often as civilians. In 2014, the Department of Veterans Affairs was treating about 650,000 veterans by giving them opiates.

Vondrell hopes more doctors become accepting of alternative therapies and more become accessible to patients, so fewer develop dangerous addictions to narcotics.

Back in the clinic room, Vietnam veteran Ron Gronitz says acupuncture is easing his knee pain.

“I could tell three, four days later, if I sat down in a chair, like I was 20 years younger, get up and walk away. I’ve had guys tell me, it’s all in your head, it’s all in your head. I don’t believe that. I really believe that it really worked,” Gronitz says.

So far, most who’ve taken advantage of these free acupuncture treatments have been older veterans. The clinic volunteers hope word spreads to younger men and women suffering with physical or mental health problems after serving in Iraq and Afghanistan.



(<https://mediad.publicbroadcasting.net/p/wuum/f>

*Christine Jablonski removes tiny needles from veteran Ron Gronitz's ears.*

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