

## Rowan Pelling: I really believe acupuncture helped me to get pregnant

Alternative medicine gets a rough ride from the naysayers – but Rowan Pelling has no trouble accepting that a woman conceived after a foot massage



Stick it to me: Rowan Pelling receiving acupuncture from Caroline Hammond at the Kite Clinic Photo: Geoff Pugh for The Telegraph

By Rowan Pelling

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The surest way to start a spat over the dinner table in strictly rational and empirical, science-worshipping Cambridge, where I live, is to say that you think complementary medicine can sometimes prove effective. It's tantamount, in many of my friends' eyes, to declaring yourself a congenital imbecile.

I have enormous sympathy for their views on the matter. I understand that the only proper way of proving the efficacy of a particular treatment is the use of randomised controlled trials, and that anecdotes of "miracle cures" hardly amount to serious evidence. I would be the first to admit that you never hear of anyone who requires a heart by-pass, or liver transplant, being healed by homeopathy or Reiki. I find it just as terrifying as any doctor when a cancer patient declares they'd rather not have an operation because they're going to sit in a pyramid and meditate with crystals.

At the same time, I have a degree in English literature and I am highly suggestible, hence my fondness for Hamlet's quote: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

When I read last week that 36-year-old Sarah Hunter conceived her first baby, after 13 years of trying, following a course of reflexology and that she became pregnant again following a foot massage on holiday, I didn't scorn her conclusion that these events were contingent upon one another. Why shouldn't "unexplained infertility" have a psychosomatic element and be alleviated by a touchy-feely, listening therapy? After all, nearly half of all British adults surveyed by the Wellcome Trust Monitor in 2009 said that they had used one or more of the six most popular alternative remedies – herbal medicine, homeopathy, acupuncture, Reiki, hypnotherapy and crystal healing – at least once in their lives.

My own complementary medicine guru, the acupuncturist Gerad Kite, who heads Harley Street's Kite Clinic, is noted for his success in the field of fertility. I say that confidently, because he's helped to make me pregnant, so to speak, along with a number of my acquaintances.

A great friend first sent me to see Kite in 2003. I was immobilised by grief, following the termination of my first pregnancy and the knowledge that my mother had just months to live. I had no sense of the thinking behind Chinese medicine concerning energy called "qi" moving around the body's "meridians". However, when Kite performed that first treatment I felt strong currents that can only be described as an "electric" course round my body.

The next day I travelled to Scotland with my husband, expecting (excuse the indelicacy) my period to arrive with its habitual punctuality. I felt as if I was ovulating instead, and nine months later my first son was born.

I started referring friends with fertility issues (all in their late thirties and early forties) to Kite – with startling results. One publisher who had

spent eight years trying to conceive a sibling for her son became pregnant within weeks of her first consultation and went on to have two more children. Indeed, only one of the 10 women I've referred didn't conceive, saying after five sessions that it wasn't for her.

Similarly hard to explain are the healing hands of Jane Evans, the independent midwife I hired for the birth of my second son. During the most intense part of the labour, she was massaging my back with her hands and I could feel a warm current of "electricity" flowing from her hands to my body in the most reassuring manner.

I know such stories prove little to the seasoned sceptic and, in the worst light, seem to offer false hope. I also see that Kite's and Evans's charisma and qualities of empathy are part of the wider picture.

However, it's also true that in 2008 Eric Manheimer, from the University of Maryland, published a review of acupuncture's effect on IVF treatment in the *British Medical Journal*, based on seven UK studies, which found that genuine acupuncture could increase a woman's chance of pregnancy by 65 per cent. Another recent and wide-ranging study has shown that the analgesic properties of real acupuncture were slightly, but significantly, greater than the placebo – which is better than the results for some widely prescribed medicines.

I suppose the point is that we frequent users of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) believe that if a treatment works for you, it darn well works for you. My friend **Nikki Page**, a former Westminster councillor, looks a glowing 25 years younger than her age and is certain her gut was set to rights by her herbalist Susan Koten, after a severe case of poisoning by the antibiotic Septrin nearly killed her in her twenties; her eyes and nails bled and she was blighted by ulcers. My older sister once contracted a virus so severe she couldn't walk, balance, or hold her baby for six weeks. Doctors and hospitals had no answers, but one session with a cranial osteopath worked wonders.

I sent out a discussion strand on Facebook while writing this piece, asking if anyone had experienced a therapy that seemed miraculous at the time. Thirty or so women replied enthusiastically about assorted healers. One female doctor said that while she pooh-pooed the idea of CAM, she had nevertheless found a pain in her arms was alleviated by shiatsu and that she and her therapist "used to have hysterics together about how much our belief systems lacked concordance".

My little sister is a trained masseuse, and it often seems to me there are many times when therapeutic massage works simply because people are crying out to be touched – the most profound of human needs that can be snatched from us after childhood.

Back on Facebook, my male friends mostly harrumphed. A BBC correspondent wrote: "I have some extraordinary tales about apparently intelligent people believing whatever quack nonsense they happen to have come across."

Paul Wicks, a director at the patient network PatientsLikeMe, pointed out that he's spent 12 years working with people diagnosed with motor neurone disease (also called ALS), "who are aggressively pedalled complementary and alternative medicines by charlatans and well-meaning people, trying to find a way to extend their life". He's seen "patients plug themselves into batteries full of acid next to their bed" or "fly to China for stem-cell treatments that gave them meningitis".

Wicks is part of a group, comprising doctors and researchers, called ALS Untangled, that investigates such claims of miracle cures, and says they haven't uncovered a single verifiable case in 23 investigations.

Jim Smith, director of the MRC National Institute for Medical Research, reiterated that "randomised, controlled trials are the only way to go. Otherwise one will do more harm than good."

Despite these stern testimonies, I cling to the belief that numerous people are helped through some of the more nebulous medical disorders (migraines, infertility, depression, insomnia, chronic fatigue, and gut problems) by CAM, even if what we're harnessing is arguably the placebo effect.

And when we talk about placebo, aren't we often using the term to parcel up wider, intriguing implications about the relationship between mind and body? In their book *Why Do People Get Ill?*, the psychoanalyst Darian Leader and academic David Corfield ask why happily married men have a greater chance of surviving the first year after a heart attack than their single, depressed male counterparts; and how can an illness like rheumatoid arthritis worsen after an emotional conflict?

Why is the medical profession often so poor at listening and linking patients' mental states to their physical ones? The authors say it's not entirely surprising that around 70 per cent of patients will seek help from an alternative practitioner, when the average consultation between a patient and a GP in a city like London lasts six to eight minutes.

When I asked Leader if he thought the placebo effect played a valid role in CAM, he said: "We all know that in certain areas placebo works as well as many medical treatments and usually doesn't have side-effects, so we should not be too harsh on these treatments."

Indeed not – and sometimes a story from the unconventional shores of medicine is so moving and unexpected that the only humane response is acceptance. Take my singer friend who found a lump in her groin four years ago. An ultrasound revealed 11 fibroids. She was sent to a fibroid clinic, where she had a five-minute appointment with a junior consultant and came under pressure to sign a consent form that included “a clause asking if I wanted to keep the top of my vagina when they removed my womb, so I might retain some sensation during sex”. At another hospital, clinicians laughed at her when she expressed the wish, aged 41, to keep her womb in case she wanted children.

Then one of her friends suggested an Ayurvedic practitioner, who was also an accredited chemist. Dr Mistry took her pulse, asked her questions, and told her to change her entire diet and to eat at set times. He prescribed aloe vera, a whey drink, iron supplements and other tinctures: total cost £25. Within a month, the heavy bleeding had halved and continued to subside. Three years later: “I lead a really busy life singing, touring and performing... and my fibroids have shrunk so you wouldn’t notice them now.” Perhaps the most telling phrase she used is that: “I feel I am on a path to complete health now, which is not about the quick fix of surgery but about gentle lifestyle and food choices.”

Maybe the real reason CAM works for so many is that it inspires us to take control of our health. The fact is, it’s far easier to take advice on diet and meditation from an acupuncturist with bright eyes, who practises yoga, than it is from a stressed NHS doctor with a bigger girth and more stressed liver than your own.

The historian and author Liza Filby told me she once ended up in hospital in China with severe swelling of every part of her body. The doctor’s diagnosis was “excessive Western living”. She was given acupuncture, “some odd tea that tasted like vinegar”, and a lecture on “the six excesses”. Finally, he told her: “Westerners know nothing of balance: they live a life of excessive indulgence, followed by excessive restraint.”

It’s hard to disagree – particularly in the run-up to the glut of Christmas and gloom of January. If part of that balance is reflexology, needles, a cheese-less Ayurvedic diet, or even a tincture of *Allium Cepa*, should anyone really berate us? It’s surely preferable to my friend Fiona’s suggestion for a miracle cure: “A bottle of vodka and a handful of sleeping pills.”

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