



Swansea Acupuncture Project: The way forward for more affordable acupuncture clinics?

As a student acupuncturist I had vague socialist ideals of making acupuncture affordable for everyone. Over time my high hopes eroded as the realities of being self employed dawned on me; room hire, insurance, unpaid holidays etc. I began to realise why complementary medicine is a relatively expensive commodity. Sure I might be able to see a few patients at a discount, but everyone else has to pay the full fee. The socialist inclinations dwindled.

Last summer, some eight years later while reading Chinese Whispers, I recognised a colleague from the College of Integrated Chinese Medicine who had been running a low cost acupuncture clinic in Brighton. I recalled our student days spent swapping whole food beans and moaning about the price of textbooks. A light bulb went on in my mind: if he can successfully set up a low cost clinic then so can I.

Having studied a mix of TCM and five element acupuncture I needed to overcome a few reservations about multi bed, high speed acupuncture; is this 'fast food' style of acupuncture undermining the true quality of a slower and possibly more intensive method of treatment? Can a practitioner honestly gain a clear diagnosis in such a short period of time? Would patients still feel they were getting a good standard of care? Would I enjoy working like this?

To solve a few of these riddles I volunteered at the Gateway Clinic for several days. Despite a relatively brief visit it was a hugely enjoyable and educational experience. The vast majority of patients reported to me how much they benefited from the treatment and felt the standard of care was very good. The staff all seemed to work at their own pace, which was fast by my standards, but I was reassured that it was important to work at one's own speed. Naturally this enabled one to remain centred, calm and focused to make a clear diagnosis.

After consulting with the Dragon Clinic in Brighton, battling the idea around in several supervision sessions, and a discussion with a local homeopathic charity, I drew up a plan for a low cost clinic in Swansea.

Initially I had been hoping to set up the project with another acupuncturist, but I could not find anyone local, so I started looking for a location. Searching for a largish space to rent once a week that is relatively cheap, central and pleasant to work in is invariably difficult. Rooms were too expensive, small or grotty. Months went by and the hunt continued on a back burner.

Then luckily things fell into place. While doing a promotion day at a local health food shop I met a member of staff from a local housing association. She worked at Connect, a support centre for adults with mental health difficulties and is part of Caer Las Housing Association. As part of the support offered at Connect auricular acupuncture had become very popular and was done by various trained staff members. Consequently a large number of staff and clients were benefiting from treatments and wanted to experience full body acupuncture.

I visited the location and was offered a largish room with both access to Connect and an entrance hall via a reception. Caer Las agreed I could treat their clients for a small fee and also offer acupuncture to the rest of the community. Full of enthusiasm I gave the room a fresh lick of paint and started a month later.

Things started slowly. Only a few members of Connect were willing to pay for treatment and the general public did not know about the clinic. To get the ball rolling I did a mail out and offered treatment to Connect members for free/ by donation, and sure enough everyone wanted appointments. The Housing Association responded by allowing me to use the room for free. At the same time friends of Connect, staff and the general public started to book appointments.

I now see around 12–18 patients on a Tuesday at Connect and the clinic only started in March. Perhaps a third by donation/free while others pay £25/20 for a consultation and £15/10 a treatment. Experience wise this has been great; I see a wider range of health complaints than ever before and treat people from all ends of the community. Both my wallet and my clinical knowledge have expanded!

Are patients flowing from my more expensive treatment clinic to the low cost clinic? What about patient commitment and valuing acupuncture treatment?

Well it seems that some people would never go to a multi bed clinic, while others could not afford a course of treatment at a more expensive rate. A few may cross over but most people seem to be happy having a course of treatment in the environment they are used to. As for commitment and value, I am finding that people are committed and they value a course of acupuncture treatment regardless of how much they are paying for it. I also believe that a fee or donation is important as it reflects a recognition of the quality of service being offered, as well as representing a form of exchange. However, motivation for change and commitment to the acupuncture is individual and irrespective of the amount of money the patient is paying.

The last six months has lead me to speculate that across the UK there may be a wide-angle of staff and clients within similar projects who are currently benefiting from auricular acupuncture and may be keen to have low cost acupuncture clinic as part of their service. Is this the way forward for more affordable acupuncture clinics?