

# The role of acupuncture schools and individual practitioners in acupuncture research

Lixing Lao, Karen Sherman, Mark Bovey

## INTRODUCTION

Clinical research in Western biomedicine is usually conducted by biomedical practitioners in a medical school, medical research center, or hospital setting. The researchers are familiar with the disease they study and with the 'gold standard' scientific method that developed to evaluate new biomedical therapies. By contrast, most of the funded acupuncture/TCM research is not conducted in an acupuncture/TCM academic or research setting, but rather in biomedical settings, which are neither designed for acupuncture/TCM research, nor staffed with experienced acupuncture/TCM practitioners. In order to evaluate acupuncture/TCM effectively using Western research methodology, without losing the diagnostic and therapeutic characteristics of this traditional healing method, research efforts should involve TCM/acupuncture educators and practitioners.

The present article explores (1) how individual acupuncture practitioners or acupuncture schools can be involved in acupuncture research, (2) the role they can most appropriately play, (3) the types of research studies that can be conducted in these settings, and (4) the advantages and limitations of this approach. Realistic goals for practitioners and schools interested in research are put forward and discussed.

## TYPES AND FORMATS OF ACUPUNCTURE RESEARCH

Considering that most acupuncture schools are relatively small with limited research funds, high-standard, randomized, controlled trials (RCTs) and basic science research may not be appropriate. However, individual acupuncture practitioners and educators often have extensive experience with patient care and acupuncture training. Therefore, their participation in research can contribute substantially and provide important information that may be used in future RCTs<sup>1</sup> or address questions that are rarely covered by a RCT.<sup>2</sup> There are several research formats that may be appropriate for these settings: case studies, case series, surveys, and outcome studies.

### Case studies and case series

A *case study* usually documents in detail a successful treatment and the response of an individual patient.<sup>3</sup> Documenting a number of cases with the same condition treated by the same practitioner or same group of practitioners using the same style of treatment modality is a *case series* or clinical observation study.<sup>2,4</sup> The case study is most useful for difficult conditions such as cancer, AIDS, or renal failure, where the patient would not be expected to

**Lixing Lao**,  
Complementary Medicine  
Program, University of  
Maryland School of  
Medicine, Baltimore,  
Maryland 21207-6697, USA.  
Maryland Institute of  
Traditional Chinese  
Medicine, Bethesda,  
Maryland 20814, USA.

**Karen Sherman**, Center  
for Health Studies, Group  
Health Cooperative, Seattle  
WA 98101, USA.

**Mark Bovey**, Acupuncture  
Research Resource Centre,  
Complementary Health  
Studies, University of Exeter,  
Exeter EX1 2LU, UK.

Correspondence to: **Lixing Lao**, Ph.D., L.Ac., Associate  
Professor, Complementary  
Medicine Program,  
University of Maryland  
School of Medicine, Kernan  
Hospital Mansion, 2200  
Kernan Drive, Baltimore,  
Maryland 21207-6697, USA.  
Tel: (410) 448-6873;  
Fax: (410) 448-6875;  
E-mail: llao@compmed.  
umm.edu

