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Study to examine the use of acupuncture as treatment for children with anxiety

A new pilot study at the University of Lethbridge is taking a traditional approach to a complex problem and determining the feasibility of using acupuncture in treating children with anxiety.

Naturopathic medicine, which includes acupuncture, blends modern scientific knowledge with traditional and natural forms of medicine, an approach that is reflected in Dr. Brenda Leung's educational path. Leung, U of L assistant professor in Public Health and the Emmy Droog Chair in Complementary and Alternative Healthcare, blends her designation as a naturopathic doctor with a PhD in epidemiology.

This week, in concert with Naturopathic Medicine Week (May 9 to 15), Leung describes a research study she's conducting with Dr. Wendy Takeda, a local acupuncturist and traditional Chinese medicine practitioner. Part of Leung's role as the Emmy Droog Chair is to collaborate with professionals in the community and increase research capacity.

Takeda, who also has a master's degree in physiotherapy, has provided acupuncture to children with anxiety and has noticed positive outcomes. In partnership with Leung, Takeda wants to use this anecdotal evidence as the foundation for a formal research study. The study has been approved by the U of L Human Subject Research Committee and is supported by a grant from the Canadian CAM Research Fund. Conducting a scientific study will allow them to collect data on a larger group of children to determine if the acupuncture treatment provides positive results.

"Individual stories are interesting, but to understand how well a treatment works, we need to collect data in a systematic fashion, thus this collaboration with Dr. Takeda will allow us to use science to understand whether acupuncture is helpful for anxiety in children," says Leung.

The study is a randomized trial. Children selected to participate in the study will be randomly placed in one of two groups. One group will receive an acupuncture session once a week for five weeks. The other group will wait for five weeks before they receive the same acupuncture sessions as the first group. Both groups of children will be reassessed after the five-week mark to determine if the children who received acupuncture saw improvement in their anxiety

compared with the children who received no treatment. The nurse who assesses the children will be unaware of the children's group assignment.

Takeda and Leung hope to assess results with a group of 22 children. The researchers are still looking for children to participate in the study. Parents of children aged eight to 15 who suffer from anxiety and are interested in participating in the study can contact Leung at brenda.leung@uleth.ca. Acupuncture treatments for children in the study are free. Leung expects the results will be available sometime this fall.

"Acupuncture has been shown to be relatively safe, even for children. Other studies have supported that," says Leung. "This project is a valuable demonstration of collaboration between an academic institution like the U of L and practitioners in the community."

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