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THE MIRACLE NEEDLE

Acupuncture was once derided as 'loony'. Today it heals bad backs, conquers addictions and, says new research, even helps during the menopause. So why does it work?

By **Bonnie Estridge**

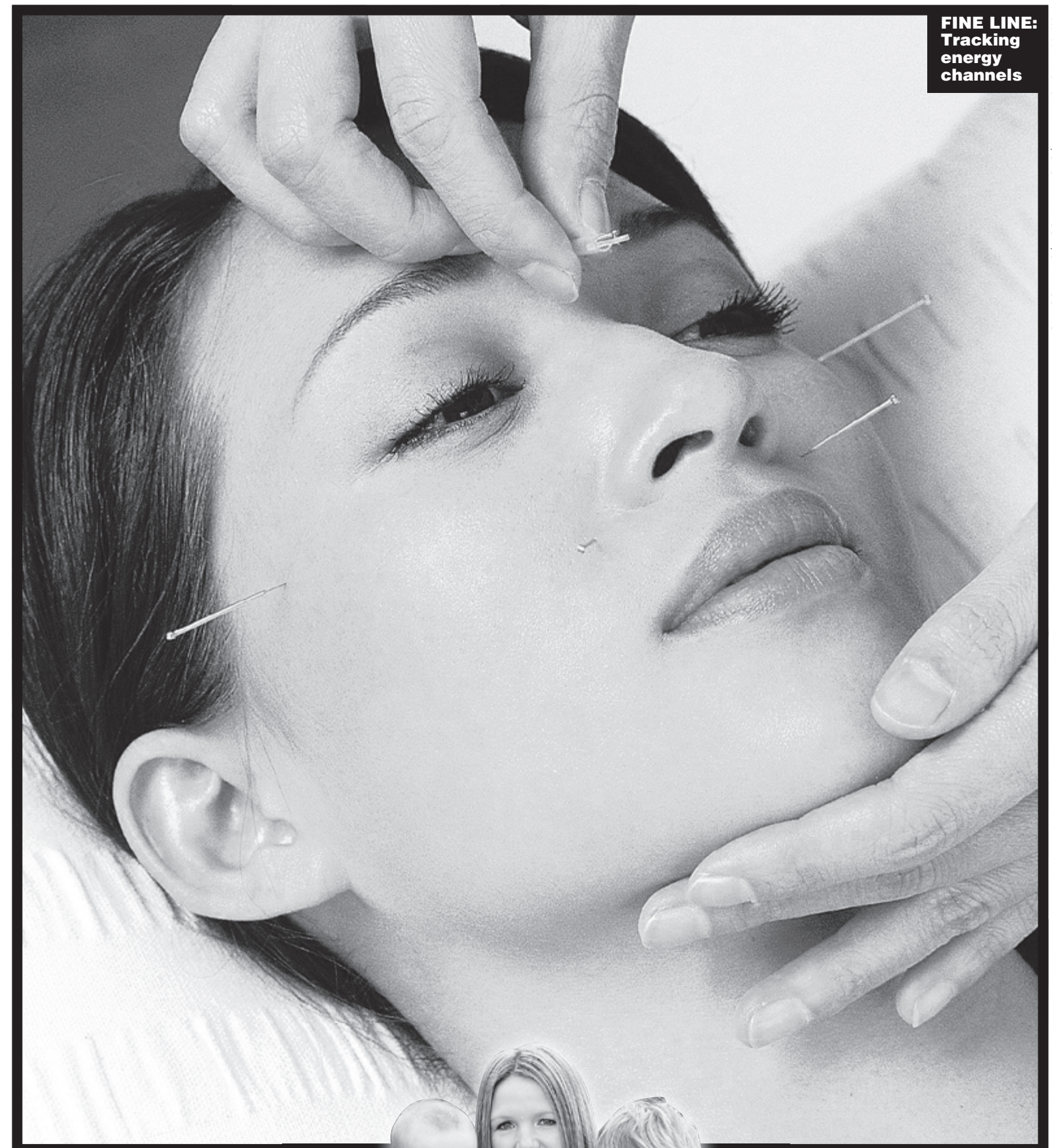
THE THERAPY AND WHAT IT CLAIMS TO DO

IAN STONES is a spokesman and student services co-ordinator for the British Acupuncture Council (BAcC). He says:

THE underlying principle of acupuncture is that all the body's functions are interdependent and connected by the flow of "qi", or vital energy, around the body. By inserting ultra-fine, sterile disposable needles into selected acupuncture points on the body the practitioner's intention is to regulate qi, stimulate the body's own healing response and restore its natural balance. The qi is believed to flow in a series of meridians, or channels, that network through the entire body. Illness and pain – whether physical or emotional – occur when the flow of qi is impaired and the needles that we use act like switches which affect the flow of qi through the web of meridians. The flow of qi can be disturbed by any number of causes including poor nutrition, stress, infection, old age, physical injury and emotional trauma such as anxiety, anger or grief. Having diagnosed the nature and cause of the imbalance, the acupuncturist will design an individual treatment plan for the patient. Treatment is aimed at resolving the root cause of a condition as well as relieving symptoms. This leads to a more permanent resolution of a patient's problems.

● *It is always advisable to visit an acupuncturist registered with the BAcC (020 8735 0400/www.acupuncture.org.uk).*

the breech position, her first instinct was to make an appointment to see her acupuncturist. The 33-year-old mother of Eli, three, says: "I knew I had to be not only physically but also emotionally strong to get through what could be a very difficult birth. I decided to visit my acupuncturist Philip Weeks to see if he could give me treatment which might encourage my daughter Heidi [now eight months old] to turn into the correct position as I had heard he had done this for other patients. "I wanted a natural birth at home with no pain relief and after having acupuncture for Eli's birth – which was a terrific experience – I knew that this was what I wanted for Heidi. "Philip placed the needles in my



FINE LINE: Tracking energy channels

PHOTOS: PHOTOLIBRARY; STUART MASON; JAMIE JONES

IT CHANGED MY LIFE

FINANCIAL consultant Deb Gould dismisses any grain of scepticism about acupuncture as it has, she maintains, effectively cured her of the crippling migraines which had plagued her since her teens. Deb, 40, says that the "banging, thumping pain coupled with nausea and sickness" interfered with her life to the point where she was becoming desperate for help. The situation became worse a year ago when she damaged her shoulder in a car accident. "The damage impacted on my migraines making them even worse and more frequent. I had to take time off work because all I could do to help myself was lie in a darkened room and I was seriously worried that I would lose my job." On the recommendation of a friend a "pretty sceptical" Deb went to see acupuncturist Mandy Laing at the Scented Garden Clinic near her home in Cheshire last year. "The first treatment had a significant effect on me," she recalls. "I felt very nauseous while it was going on and nearly passed out. Mandy explained that this could happen to those who experienced particularly severe migraines. "But from that first session – which cost £50 – my migraines improved considerably from two to three a week to one every couple of weeks and they were far less severe. "Soon I was going for months with no migraines but I'm about to have my first appointment since October last year as I had a couple of attacks again recently. "I will get into a routine of having pre-emptive top-ups every few months which, with luck, should keep the migraines completely at bay. "I'm very open-minded about how it works. I suppose that there is a chance it could be having a placebo effect – but so what if it is? It certainly works for me and has changed my life."



RELIEVED: Deb

stomach, legs, feet and head at the energy points. After just two hour-long sessions the week before she was born, Heidi had turned so that she was head down and Philip explained that the acupuncture had given Heidi the strength to make that final turn. "There was no need for me to have acupuncture during the labour because the sessions I had been through helped me manage the intensity of the birth. I believe it strengthened my constitution and mentally prepared me to commit to birthing my daughter without needing drugs." Interestingly, it seems that women appear to be more inclined to investigate the possibilities of acupuncture than men. Philip Weeks says: "Out of the patients I see, about 60 per cent



CONVINCED: Jenny Lewis had acupuncture during her pregnancies

are women. Usually they are interested in their general health, often with hormone-related issues. Men tend to come for more specific problems such as chronic back pain, migraine and erectile dysfunction. But I've found that on the whole people are very open to trying acupuncture and why not? After all it is has been used for at least 3,000 years. "I have been practising acupuncture for six years and believe it works so well because it has a broad-spectrum effect on balancing hormones, immune function and stimulating the body's natural healing response." Gordon Key, 78, a former journalist who lives in Shrewsbury, turned to acupuncture 10 years ago when a slipped disc left him unable to stand. "The NHS was pretty unresponsive – no conventional medication worked, neither did physiotherapy or going to a chiropractor," he says. "I have practised yoga for some time and am, in general, open-minded about complementary or alternative therapies. I started having regular treatments and after just a few, the pain subsided. "I still have monthly sessions and acupuncture helped me only recently when I twisted my ankle. It is an intriguing form of therapy which helped me where conventional medicine totally failed. "I don't know why some people are sceptical about acupuncture – it's not some new-fangled treatment, it has been going for thousands of years so there must be something in it."