The 6th Annual Symposium on Complementary Health Care, an international scientific conference held at Exeter, UK, took place in December 1999. With an emphasis on original and rigorous scientific research, oral and poster presentations were made on subjects ranging from acupuncture, phytotherapy, homoeopathy to floatation spa therapy, therapeutic touch and healing energy therapy. Daily keynote lectures gave in-depth topical overviews while clinical updates summarised recently published research in the areas of pain management, depression and peripheral vascular disease.

On Friday morning, Dr. Klaus Linde (Munich, Germany) presented the results of a study comparing acupuncture with midazolam as a pre-treatment in 108 in-patients undergoing diagnostic gastroscopy. Patients were either randomised (26%) or allocated to a treatment of their choice, with 20% choosing acupuncture, 47% choosing midazolam and 7% choosing no pre-treatment. 70% of patients who had received acupuncture and 85% of patients receiving midazolam said that they would choose these pre-treatments again in the event of a future gastroscopy. Dr. Linde concluded that acupuncture is a satisfactory pre-treatment option for gastroscopy although the majority of patients preferred sedation with conventional medicine. This study highlighted the difficulty of randomisation in clinical trials, with unwillingness of patients to consent being a major problem.

A number of studies dealing with complementary therapies in rheumatic conditions were presented during the conference. These included an oral presentation by Dr. Gudrun Ulrich-Merzenich (Bonn, Germany) on the management of rheumatoid arthritis (RA) by traditional herbal drug preparations in India. Therapeutic effectiveness of Semecarpus anacardium, Commiphora mukul, Terminalia chebula and Castor oil were assessed in 44 RA patients using outcome measures of pain, painful, tender and swollen joint counts, Ritchie index, morning stiffness, erythrocyte sedimentation rate, C-reactive protein, rheumatoid factor and hyaluronic acid serum concentrations. After 10 months, significant improvements were seen in most outcome measures. Dr. Ulrich-Merzenich reported that the improved clinical status of 11 patients, monitored up to 28 months, persisted.

Prof. Paul Dieppe (Bristol, UK) delivered a stimulating keynote lecture on complementary and conventional therapies for osteoarthritis (OA). He talked about the importance of listening to patient concerns and presented a survey which showed the high priority placed on physiotherapy research and education by patients. He stressed the importance of meaning and coping strategies in dealing with chronic diseases such as OA.

Finally, a meta-analysis of randomised controlled trials on the efficacy of therapeutic touch (TT) in the treatment of anxiety was presented by Dr. Sara Warber (Ann Arbor, MI, USA). She said that of the 11 anxiety studies located and fulfilling the inclusion criteria, 9 measured the Spielberger’s State Trait Anxiety Index (STAI) and were analysed further. Six of these studies used a mimic TT control and showed that TT significantly reduced transient anxiety, decreasing the STAI by 3.04 (95% CI 1.42–4.67). The 3 remaining studies compared TT to routine clinical touch and demonstrated a significant 6.65 (95% CI 4.74–8.55) point reduction in anxiety for the TT groups.

Individuals interested in this year’s event (December, 7–9, 2000, Exeter, UK) should contact Barbara Wider, Department of Complementary Medicine, University of Exeter, 25 Victoria Park Road, Exeter EX2 4NT (UK). Tel. +44 13 92 424-872, Fax -989 E-mail B.Wider@exeter.ac.uk.

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