

Chinese healing art gives hope for autism

By Nigel Hawkes
Health Editor

A NEW treatment using acupuncture to improve symptoms in children with autism was outlined at a conference yesterday.

Professor Virginia Wong and her team from the University of Hong Kong used an innovative technique called tongue acupuncture. They say it works by stimulating specific points thought to correspond to brain functions.

Brain imaging techniques were used to observe the response of the brain in areas which might be linked to autism. The results demonstrated an improvement in central features of the disease such as problems with language, social skills, cognition, hyperactivity, attention, aggression and functional independence.

Professor Wong, who is attending the World Congress of Neurology at Earls Court in London, which ends on Friday, said: "There was a significant improvement in the intellectual function and communication ability in some of these children. Even their teachers detected an improvement in their students in terms of behaviour and communication skills."

She added: "There is a dire need for the integration of traditional Chinese medicine and Western medicine in neurorehabilitation. Our study shows that an interdisciplinary approach involving both can provide a new framework for helping children with autism."

If a connection between specific tongue points and various brain regions can be mapped out it could radically reform the way autism, and possibly other disorders, are diagnosed.

Autism is a complex developmental disability that typically appears during the first three years of life and is estimated to occur in as many as one in 500 individuals.

It is four times more common in boys than girls and knows no racial, ethnic or social boundaries.

The congress was also told that Britain is desperately short of neurologists, the specialists who treat brain and nerve disorders.

The President of the Association of British Neurologists said yesterday that there are only 358 consultant neurologists in the UK, one for every 164,000 people, compared to one per 26,000 in the United States and one per 39,000 in France.

Professor Charles Warlow, of the Western General Hospital in Edinburgh, said: "In the UK we are lucky to have very good primary care, but secondary care, which is where neurology sits, is under enormous pressure. We need to double the number of neurologists to at least 700 if we are to get anywhere near the European level of service to the community."

Neurological problems, which include stroke, epilepsy, dementia, multiple sclerosis, brain injury and Parkinson's disease, already account for 10 per cent of health costs. As the population ages, the burden of neurological diseases is expected to increase.

Professor Warlow said that clinical research in Britain could be stifled by "layers of bureaucracy and excessive regulation". The problem is the prevention of access to patient information under the Data Protection Act, and the growth of ethical review committees in hospitals and universities.

Women stay mentally sharper than men in old age, a new study in The Netherlands has shown. In a group of 599 people aged 85 or over, women performed significantly better in tests of mental functioning.

The likeliest explanation, says the team from the Gerontology and Geriatrics Department at Leiden University, which carried out the study, is that women suffer less narrowing of the arteries than men.

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