

Holes in one

Needle for long enough and you'll get most things out of people – even stress.
This month, Mr Stress tries out acupuncture

IT'S BEEN A HARD WEEK. THE CAR BROKE DOWN, THE CATS HAVE DIARRHOEA, and I feel like going to work about as much as I feel like hot needles stuck in my left eye. Which is exactly what the boss recommends. "You're too stressed, boy," he booms. "You need to get some needles stuck in you. Go visit Dr Lan, he'll sort you out." This is my dubious introduction to the world of acupuncture.

Acupuncture is a form of traditional Chinese medicine that has been in existence for millennia. The first record of it is found in the 4 700-year-old *Huang Di Nei Jing* (*Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine*), said to be the oldest medical textbook in the world. As the basis of acupuncture, Shen Nung theorised that the body had an energy force running through it, known as Chi. The Chi consists of all essential life activities – spiritual, emotional, mental and physical. According to this theory, your health is influenced by the flow of Chi in the body, in combination with the universal balancing forces of Yin and Yang. If the flow of Chi is insufficient or interrupted, Yin and Yang become unbalanced, and illness may occur. Chi travels through the body along 'meridians' – acupuncture points are specific locations where the meridians come to the surface of the skin, and are easily accessible by 'needling'.

This still sounds like a bad idea to me as I am needle phobic and can't get to grips with the idea of my body as a field of energy patterns. However, it is too late for such concerns, as I am outside Gordon's Institute in Mowbray, Cape Town, about to head inside to meet Dr Michael Lan, acupuncture practitioner and doctor of Chinese medicine.

Dr Lan is at once a reassuring and intimidating presence, a combination that leaves me feeling strangely at ease. He has been practising various hard forms of martial arts, including karate, Tae Kwando, Shaolin and Kung Fu, since 1983. In 1992 he began training in so-called soft forms such as Tai Chi, Chi Kung and meditation.

Arriving at Gordon's gym, you are immediately struck by the aura of the place: the rooms where Tai Chi and Kung Fu are practised, the faint aroma of incense, and the quiet. Dr Lan, a dapper, softly-spoken man, ushers me into the consulting room and politely enquires exactly what my problem is. Thinking of knitting needles, I explain that I am a little stressed and that acupuncture has been recommended as a good cure for this. He smiles and nods – acupuncture is good for many things.

He explains that, using his finely tuned intuition and his knowledge of acupuncture points along my meridians, he will be inserting a pattern of needles all over my body in order to restore the energetic balance in my system and to calm, re-energise and de-stress me. I nod mutely. Needles

all over my body? The mere thought makes me more stressed than ever. Picking up on my consternation, Dr Lan goes on to say that he will insert one in the crown of my head, one in my forehead, one in each shoulder, elbow, hand and knee. No porcupine stunts here, but still quite a few needles.

