

'Acupuncture mothers' find childbirth easier

Because an Auckland doctor saw failings and risks involved with the use of drugs, he looked for other ways of helping women in labour. "Acupuncture seemed to be the obvious answer," says Dr John Hilton.

Dr Hilton, a strong supporter of natural and drug-free child birth, said he is opposed to the use of tranquillizers because he thinks they put the baby at additional risk.

"The babies of women who are given large doses of pain-killers or tranquillizers often appear sedated at birth, irritable and slow to establish feeding."

Dr Hilton says although these side effects are not scientifically proven, he believes they are real and doctors should avoid using drugs if there is an alternative method of pain relief.

"I first used acupuncture a year ago, largely as a result of seeing it used by midwives."

The techniques are quite simple and because of his knowledge of anatomy Dr Hilton says he is able to learn the acupuncture points from a book.

"In my experience it seems to help mothers relax. They have shorter labours, don't feel pain until later in the contraction and have an increased pain threshold. Mothers say their births are easier and the pain more manageable."

It's not a pain-free experience like acupuncture used in operations without anaesthetic. The acupuncture points he uses reduce the pain and promote a normal labour.

In cases where the contractions stop or become irregular Dr Hilton says acupuncture appears to bring on a normal physical labour. It's also used sometimes for breech births and to turn the baby round.

"Although it's not scientifically proven there is strong evidence that these things appear to happen. If it

appears to work and the mothers say it works then in my opinion this justifies its use."

Dr Hilton uses 12 needles — two in the hand at the base of the thumb, six in the lower legs and four in the feet. The needles go in for about 20 minutes at a stage when the woman starts to feel distressed; or reaches a point where she finds the labour too difficult to handle; or if the labour goes off or becomes irregular.

"It's used mostly on a tense, uptight or stressed person. What works on the pain and what works to relax a person is hard to say, but there is no question in my mind that it works."

Dr Hilton uses these techniques a couple of times a month at Waitakere Hospital, on women who have become so upset or tense they need some assistance.

He says patients are pretty receptive to the use of acupuncture except those who have a fear of needles.

Some feel faint or refuse acupuncture because of this needles phobia.

But Dr Hilton does say acupuncture sometimes brings only slight relief, "when a woman is extremely stressed and the source of the stress and the hospital atmosphere are all wrong."

He says acupuncture techniques are simple to use and he would like to see a greater acceptance of the method in hospitals as an alternative to drugs.

Nursing sisters could also be trained in the use of acupuncture, he says.

"I'm not trying to prove it works and I know I'm biased. But I also know that when faced with a woman having labour problems then acupuncture works."

Relaxed and in control

After finding that acupuncture had successfully cured her of headaches, Jane McAllister (22), again found acupuncture helped — this time at the birth of her fourth child.

"I was tense and uptight. I'd had enough of the pain and wanted the contractions to stop. I'd got to the stage when one would normally be given drugs but I chose acupuncture instead because I didn't want the drugs to affect my baby."

The midwife gave Mrs McAllister acupuncture for about 30 minutes. She had two needles in the knees and one in the right hand.

"Afterwards I felt terribly relaxed and more in control of the situation. It definitely deadened the pain and I didn't feel the contractions at all. The change was incredible."

"Even though I'd had acupuncture before I never believed it could be so effective. It really proved it to me."

Mrs McAllister said she'd recommend acupuncture as the first form of pain relief instead of drugs and would like to see it available in hospitals for anyone who wanted it.

Baby wrong way round

"When you're desperate you'll try anything," said a woman who, despite a fear of needles, had acupuncture to turn her baby around.

Eight weeks before her third baby was due a specialist told Mrs Linda Davies she would be hospitalized for the birth. This baby, like the previous two, was lying the wrong way in her womb.

The specialist said the baby would not turn on its own. "He tried to turn it but couldn't," said Mrs Davies. "I decided to try acupuncture because I was desperate and wanted a natural drug-free home birth."

Mrs Davies, who said she used to

sweat at the thought of a needle coming near her, underwent a five-day acupuncture course given under a doctor's supervision.

"I had two needles in my little toe for 20 minutes each day and on the night of the fifth day the baby turned around." This was in the two months before the baby's birth.

"When the baby was born it was a 'piece of cake' compared with the other two. It was all over in about an hour. The midwife arrived and nine minutes later the baby was born."

Mrs Davies had no acupuncture when her baby boy was born but 10 weeks after she developed a breast

infection which she couldn't get rid of.

"I went back for more acupuncture and this time had two needles in my knees, toes and hands, one at the side of each breast and one over my breast bone. The needle in the side of the infected breast felt like a knife but 24 hours later the infection had cleared up."

Mrs Davies said she decided to try acupuncture after reading about it in books; because she didn't believe in using drugs while pregnant, and because she didn't want another breach birth.

Needles came to the rescue

A 29-year-old registered nurse allowed a midwife to give her acupuncture in what was a difficult birth because she wanted a drug-free delivery.

Karin Milliken decided to have her second baby at home but ran into difficulties with a posterior birth.

"I was exhausted. I'd been in second stage labour for about two hours but the baby's head was stuck. I was still having contractions every few minutes but there was nothing anyone could do until the obstetrician arrived. The doctor and the

midwife asked me if I wanted acupuncture."

Mrs Milliken said she wasn't really aware of the acupuncture being applied and could only remember the midwife putting needles into her toes. "I felt a pricking sensation, but that was the least of my worries."

She said acupuncture helped relieve her tension and allowed her to relax and cope with the situation better.

The needles remained in for one to

two hours until just before the 9lb 11oz (4393g) baby girl finally arrived in a forceps delivery.

Mrs Milliken didn't get her drug-free delivery because the obstetrician gave her pethadiné.

"But this didn't affect the baby because I was given it at the same time she was born," she said.

"I'd recommend acupuncture to other women so long as it's done properly. I had absolute faith in the doctor and midwife and it helped me in a desperate situation."