



Blue Mountain Acupuncture Clinic

BILL HENRY

At first, Collingwood was unsure about Chinese medicine.

"I think a lot of people thought we were practising witchcraft," Corrina McFarlane said recently.

Within months of opening a single acupuncture treatment room in 2004, Jeff McMackin was busy enough to urge his wife to leave her Toronto position with an orthopaedic clinic to join him in Collingwood.

Soon the couple bought the former residence on Fourth Street East where now, a decade later, area physicians refer more than 30 per cent of Blue Mountain Acupuncture's patients. That list is 2,500 names long, and McFarlane and McMackin have given more than 50,000 acupuncture treatments, using 1.7 million needles.

"The physicians in Collingwood are forward thinkers. That is a big shift that we've seen over the last four or five years," McMackin said. "We provide an innocuous, non-pharmacological intervention that can benefit their patients, and they see that and they send some of their difficult cases to us to take care of."

Seeing very ill patients who have sometimes tried everything else without success can be both frustrating and deeply rewarding, the traditional Chinese medicine practitioners said during a recent interview at their clinic.

"We are used to being at the end of the line," McFarlane said.

"The advantage is people will try it because they've tried everything else," added McMackin.

His focus is internal medicine and neurological conditions – gynaecological complaints and gastrointestinal problems, relief for anxiety and depression.

Hers is chronic pain management and soft tissue dysfunction.

Their satisfaction comes from their approach – taking the time to here the patient's full story – and from achieving results where other treatments and approaches have failed.

"Over and over and over people will say why didn't I come here a year ago, or why didn't I come here 10 years ago," McFarlane said. "Giving people that relief, and being able to move forward, that's what keep me going."

The daughter of longtime Markdale area family physician Bruce McFarlane, Corrina was raised in Gibraltar, went to school in Thornbury, graduated high school in Meaford. After university in BC, she trained and worked in South Africa as a massage therapist, eventually realizing that job's physical challenges.

She also realized she wanted more.

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Aware of acupuncture because her father incorporated some aspects of Chinese medicine into his family practice, it suited her goals.

In his early 20s, a medical condition led McMackin to Dr. Mary Woo, who resolved the complaint with acupuncture.

When Dr. Woo later founded the prestigious Toronto School of Chinese Medicine and Acupuncture, McMackin was among the school's first students and graduates, before studying also in Beijing. He was trained in China to practise a blend of Chinese and Western medical approaches.

McFarlane was a year behind him at the Toronto school, completing the four-year program in three years and writing board exams in the U.S. because until 2005, Chinese medicine was unregulated in Ontario.

"I wanted something that felt credible to me," she said.

The two practitioners became a couple after McFarlane contacted McMackin by telephone, hoping to sell him acupuncture needles.

A complete explanation of how and why Chinese medicine



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Corrina McFarlane and Jeff McMackin have seen growing acceptance and interest in Chinese medicine since the couple opened Blue Mountain Acupuncture Clinic together a decade ago, with physicians now referring 30 per cent of the clinic's patients.

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and those little needles actually work is a challenge from Eastern or Western perspectives and beyond the scope of a brief interview, they said.

"We manipulate fascia, which has threads that move all throughout your body and wrap around your blood vessels, nerves and everything else and when you needle in to stimulate that you can change its form," McMackin said.

"When you put the needles in, you're engaging someone's immune system and causing it to charge up," added McFarlane. "There's a cascade of responses that happen. One of them is an anti-inflammatory, one of them is a blood flow, a promotion of blood flow, one of them is a release of endorphins, which is mostly what the Western world will talk about, which kills pain, and another is the relaxation of fascia or smooth muscle or knots."

More and more, such treatments are prescribed in partnership with conventional Western medicine.

"North America is in a pain management crisis right now," McFarlane said. "Everybody is addicted to whatever pain medications that have been over-prescribed. Western medicine is realizing that that was a mistake. Pain is a huge thing and with it comes depression and people's quality of life goes down the tubes."

Health plans now cover some treatments and health care providers are mandated to include acupuncture in their practice.

"Our relationships with the physicians is really blossoming in very positive way," McMackin said. "We're becoming mainstream."

That's a big change from when McFarlane's father, a family physician for 45 years, first trained to use a little acupuncture in his Markdale practice, at a time when not much was known in Canada about Chinese medicine.

"I thought my dad had lost his marbles, sticking needles in people," McFarlane said. ■