



Clockwise from top: Kristen Porter applies acupuncture to Richard Berryman; herbs; a patient undergoes cupping.

Paths of glory

Pathways to Wellness, a holistic health center in Boston, mixes up a different HIV cocktail By William Henderson

After being diagnosed with HIV in January 1986, Richard Berryman thought a lot about dying. He had watched friends die within months, sometimes weeks, of diagnosis. He didn't want to become another statistic, another name and one-inch obituary in the local gay newspaper. He wondered whether jumping off a bridge or drinking battery acid would make death easier.

Then in 1989 Berryman learned about the nonprofit AIDS Care Project, formed that year by a group of acupuncturists to provide free sessions to people living with HIV and AIDS. ACP has since become Pathways to Wellness, a full-service holistic-therapies clinic—the only one in the country modeled after a public-health agency. Pathways provides health care to all people, on a sliding pay scale. Funding comes from state and federal aid as well as paying customers, who underwrite a portion of their fees for low-cost or free care.

"I'm convinced acupuncture has kept me alive and well," says Berryman, now 51,

who lives in the Jamaica Plain neighborhood of Boston and is one of about 1,500 people seen annually at Pathways. Only recently did he add daily protease inhibitor drugs to his acupuncture regimen. "I really believe if I had not implemented this thing into my life, I wouldn't be here. And I plan to continue coming every week until the day the good Lord calls me home."

East meets West at Pathways, says lesbian executive director Kristen Porter, so patients get the benefits of both worlds. "Holistic medicine works to balance the disharmonies in the body," she says, noting that treatment plans are tailored to fit individual clients' needs. In addition to acupuncture, Pathways also offers cupping treatments, shiatsu body work, and a large Chinese herbal medicine pharmacy.

"Our treatment suggestions are based on someone's particular symptoms," Porter says, "which can include not just something like HIV but also something like a sports injury or everyday stressors."

Acupuncture doesn't hurt. The needles, thin as a hair and as flexible as taffy, are

left in the skin for 30 to 90 minutes in an effort to get a body's chi moving. Chi (or qi, pronounced "chee"), which in Chinese culture means "life energy," is believed to flow throughout the body and contribute to how good a person feels. Free-flowing chi brings good physical, mental, and emotional well-being; blocked chi (a potential side effect of taking medication) can keep the body from functioning properly.

Though there's no evidence that acupuncture delivers more T cells or a longer life span, Porter says that research shows a majority of long-term HIV survivors use holistic treatments. "There are studies that have shown acupuncture's positive effect on the immune system, but people are coming for various reasons: the side effects of medications, symptoms of their illness, and mental health support in living with chronic illness," she says. "To many patients, 'surviving' is about quality of life, and that is something we can help."

While acupuncture cannot cure HIV, it has countless benefits, from relieving upset stomachs and uncontrollable diarrhea to increasing overall energy levels.

"There is this perception that acupuncture is the equivalent of a spa treatment," says Porter, also a licensed acupuncturist. "But tell that to the men and women who come here because a treatment improves their quality of life by 100%. That's not something you're going to get at any spa."

Eric Brus, director of HIV health promotion at AIDS Action Committee, says acupuncture should never be used in place of a drug regimen: "I recognize that complementary therapies can offer a lot, but complementary therapies are just that. They're meant to complement a medical management of HIV but not to replace it."

In 2005, cuts to Ryan White Act funding caused Pathways to move to a smaller facility in the South End Community Health Center and decrease the number of free sessions a patient can receive each week. Pathways is now in the same neighborhood where Berryman spent a lot of time in the late '80s thinking about his death.

"If I had not found Pathways to Wellness, I wouldn't be here. I'm just so grateful to them," Berryman says. "Acupuncture is my magic. It's the magic that has me here today." ■

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