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## **No cure, but an aid to mobility**

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THE recent trial to find the success of acupuncture in reducing pain and improving the mobility in arthritic knees confirms the value of this ancient Chinese practice.

This well-conducted, scientifically sound trial confirms the anecdotal evidence, clinical experience and the results of lesser trials that acupuncture, so far as the relief of pain is concerned, works. It does not lessen inflammation, it does not cure arthritis, but by reducing pain it allows greater freedom and range of movement for the joint.

The generally accepted view of orthodox doctors is that acupuncture, the careful insertion of thin, sterilised needles at precise points, reduces the pain from a specific area, such as a joint, by stimulating the production of endorphins in that part of the spinal cord that is servicing the joint. Endorphins are naturally produced morphia-type substances.

Less orthodox doctors believe that there are lines of energy that together form a network of meridians over the body and that the needles interfere with this flow of energy and thereby lessen the pain.

Although acupuncture is helpful — and when used on a person suffering from a condition suitable for acupuncture can provide relief of pain — doctors must decide whether or not similar relief can be achieved by other means.

As in any medical treatment, a placebo effect — whatever its mechanism — is also important. This may in part account for the results of the recent research from the University of Southampton, which showed that sham acupuncture was as effective as the approved needling in easing neck pain.

The disadvantages of acupuncture are that it treats symptoms rather than attempts to cure the problem and that its use will always be limited to a small number of doctors who are trained in its application.