An Exploratory Study of New York City Acupuncture Clinics

Serving Low-Income Communities

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**BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE**

**Background on Acupuncture**
- Part of 3,000-year-old system of Traditional Chinese Medicine
- Insertion and manipulation of thin needles in body points identified as surface locations of internal pathways that facilitate or block the flow of chi (or qi), a type of bio-electrical energy
- Numerous clinical trials have found acupuncture effective in treating many conditions, including substance addiction and many types of pain.

**Modern History and Significance**
- In the 1970s, radical Black and Puerto Rican activists led takeover of Lincoln Hospital and creation of drug detox center offering free treatment.
- “Lincoln Detox” (1970-78) used acupuncture and political education to detox thousands of poor people of color.
- Mayor Koch fired the leaders and dismantled it in 1978.
- Many acupuncture clinics today are inspired by Lincoln Detox.
- This study sought to identify factors affecting current clinics’ ability to serve poor communities.

**STUDY DESCRIPTION**

- Qualitative research – exploratory, comparative case study of 4 clinics and 1 association of clinics
- Methods: phone interviews & clinic observation
- Subjects:
  - 3 current acupuncture clinics serving low-income people – 2 staff members from each
  - (Global) People’s Organization for Community Acupuncture – co-founder
  - Lincoln Detox – 3 former staffers

**RESULTS**

**Size and Structure**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trait</th>
<th>Lincoln Detox</th>
<th>PEACE Health</th>
<th>Third Root</th>
<th>Blue Lotus</th>
<th>POCA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Staff Size</td>
<td>60-65</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>200 clinics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weekly clients</td>
<td>250-800</td>
<td>15-25</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>12-18</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure</td>
<td>Collectives</td>
<td>Sole proprietorship</td>
<td>Workers Co-op</td>
<td>Sole proprietorship</td>
<td>Most: sole proprietorship</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Demographics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trait</th>
<th>Lincoln Detox</th>
<th>PEACE Health</th>
<th>Third Root</th>
<th>Blue Lotus</th>
<th>POCA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Staff – people of color</td>
<td>Minority</td>
<td>All</td>
<td>Majority</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>(1 white person)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clients – people of color</td>
<td>Vast majority</td>
<td>Vast majority</td>
<td>Minority</td>
<td>Minority</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clients – low-income</td>
<td>Vast majority</td>
<td>About half</td>
<td>Majority</td>
<td>Majority</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Access**

Based on interviews:
- All 5 entities seek social justice & healthcare access.
- Current clinics:
  - mixed results in reaching people of color
  - financial difficulties – esp. due to insurance restrictions
  - POCA (People’s Organization for Community Acupuncture)
  - success in reaching low-income people, but less re: people of color
  - generally financially stable

**CONCLUSIONS**

Lincoln Detox included political education & involvement. A key point: evidence that the CIA and local police departments were involved in the drug trade. Staff argued that this was part of an effort to undermine Black and Latino movements for justice.

The model was dealing with the entire individual – who they were, who could they become. We were trying to raise people’s consciousness to struggle for social justice. We helped them understand the roots of their addiction, and what they were entitled to in this society, including health, housing, other things. It was an overarching view of wellness and wholeness.

- Mickey Melendez, Puerto Rican activist; co-founder, Lincoln Detox

Few current clinics include these elements.

**REFERENCES / ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

To insurance programs and government:
- Mandate that Medicare and Medicaid cover acupuncture. “Once the federal government recognizes it as legitimate medicine, that will change everything.”
- Private insurers should:
  - include acupuncture in all coverage policies
  - eliminate restrictions on numbers, indications for acupuncture coverage

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

Thanks to my faculty advisers at the CUNY School of Public Health - Hunter Collège, Dr. Nicholas Freudenberg and Dr. Lynn Roberts.

Thanks for inspiration to Dr. Mutulu Shakur, a leader of Lincoln Detox and co-founder of Black Acupuncture Advisory Assn. of North America, still imprisoned on political charges after 28 years. See mutulushakur.com

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

To other acupuncturists:
- “The commitment to serve the people has to be first.” Make sure prices are affordable.
- Educate clients about the holistic model of care, including overall health, balance, & diet. “Without that, we’ll just forever be a disease-palliative, symptom-treatment system.”
- Help people to understand the emotional/social/political aspects of their health issues.