

Poking Fun: Ithaca Community Acupuncture offers access to care

By Glynis Hart editor@flcn.org | Posted: Wednesday, August 7, 2013 12:00 am

Ithaca Community Acupuncture is not a non-profit, it's a business, but it uses a sliding scale and asks people to pay what they can. ICA also provides free acupuncture to cancer patients and veterans; the desk is staffed by volunteers, who trade work for acupuncture. Opened in 2010, the clinic has seen its patient base growing steadily, to between 400 and 500 visits a month.

Unlike many acupuncture practices, where patients are treated one-on-one in private rooms, the community acupuncture model puts patients in a shared room, and the practitioners move quietly from one to another. "We wanted to make acupuncture more accessible to people," said Sadie Hays. Hays has an MS in Oriental Medicine from Southwest Acupuncture College in Albuquerque, NM; partners Tim Foley and Coleen Osborne-Foley, and employee, Aileen Boyd, all received their MS in Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine from Finger Lakes School of Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine at New York Chiropractic College in Seneca Falls..

Hays explained that the community model is the more common one in China: Many patients per hour, and very little talking. It allows ICA to keep their sliding scale, and not being a non-profit means they don't have to track your income to determine if you qualify. They also don't do insurance billing- payments are cash or check, period.

"As practitioners, we stay out of the money side. You write the check, we'll do the acupuncture." She emphasizes that acupuncture works with Western medicine, not as a substitute. "There are people who come in just as part of their health care, to maintain wellness and prevent illness; for others it keeps the pain at bay, keeps PMS from overtaking their lives; still others come intermittently, such as right before allergy season, or right around midterms."

"A significant amount of people come in for stress, for mood, attention deficit disorders, OCD; the contribution acupuncture can make to mental health is becoming recognized." Hays said she's been working with Gannett clinic and they see a lot of students at ICA. "Both the schools recognize there's a really wide community need for keeping high-stress, high-pressure students healthy."

The sliding scale also is nice for curious newcomers.

After a long consultation with Hays, who asked me searching questions about my medical ills, I follow her into the treatment room and she invites me to pick a recliner. The recliners are covered with clean sheets, rather like someone's summer house closed for the winter, while relaxing Chinese music is playing softly. The lights are dim, and there are screens and art arrayed around the room so each chair feels like a place. A man with his eyes shut has one of the recliners near

the door; as we go further into the room I see a woman my age ensconced in one around the corner.

“We encourage people to play Goldilocks,” said Hays.

I settle on a chair opposite the woman, who appears to be asleep. Hays said people commonly fall asleep during treatments, and if you’re out, they won’t wake you.

Depending on what they’re treating, the needles go in at varying depths. Coleen Osborne-Foley took over my treatment midway through.

“If you’ve got a cold, or something very recent, it’s near the surface; but for something chronic, the needles go deeper,” she explained.

Osborne-Foley is a former geologist. She met Tim at the Chiropractic College and they married after graduation; she radiates calm joy.

“I love my work,” she said.

Hays had constellated me with needles, literally, from head to toe. A few of them bit when they went in, but it’s considerably less than a bee sting, and most of them didn’t bother me at all.

“If it hurts, don’t play tough guy,” said Hays. “We’ll take it out.”

There’s one by the knee that’s not so great, but after a minute or two it’s not noticeable. Hays goes off shift, and I listen to the music, thinking about work, about dinner, about this historic novel about the Mountain Meadows massacre... the guy by the door snores gently, and I rate it on a scale of snores, probably around a two... in a few minutes I start falling asleep myself, thinking ‘This is a weird place to fall asleep.’

Coleen comes into the room with a new patient and settles that person, then moves to the woman in the corner, talking to her in a low voice and removing her needles. She gets to me, asks if I’m OK for another 15 minutes while she attends another patient, and I go back to my doze.

After the session I feel relaxed and kind of cheery. For \$15, I could do this just for the relaxation. But there’s something else here, dear to an old Ithacan’s heart, and that’s the community in the name.

On my way out I stop to pay, and ask the woman at the desk if she’s a volunteer.

“Oh yes,” she said. “The politics and the people of it just felt right to me. I’ve been doing it for two years.”

She smiles at me conspiratorially: “They’re wonderful people.”