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Chinese physicians have sworn by acupuncture for more than 3,000 years, but the jury is still out in the United States. Even though the practice is growing in popularity in the West, physicians still debate the use of tiny needles as a cure for serious ailments.

Barbara Squires makes a living inserting hair-thin sterilized needles into different parts of the body. "If someone wants surgery, or cortisone or pain pills, then that's their choice. But if they decide they don't want to risk the side effects of those medical modalities, then they should have the option to choose acupuncture," says Squires.

Squires believes it stimulates the flow of "Chi" - or, the body's natural healing energy. She says, "What we want to do is get this meridian flowing smoothly and freely. We want to release the muscles and the tension, in this area."

Although there have been numerous studies attempting to explain exactly how acupuncture works, the practice is still a mystery in the West. But it's no mystery to patients who believe acupuncture can help heal just about everything.

Due to popular demand, the health care market is beginning to respond. Some insurance companies now pay for acupuncture, and two years ago the Food and Drug Administration approved acupuncture needles as legitimate medical devices.

But acupuncture will probably remain an alternative treatment until it gets a shot in the arm from the federal government.

- Cheryl Wills

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