

Questions for Acupuncturist Cynthia Esseichick of Ann Arbor Healing Arts

(Editors' Note: In the Fall 2011 *Crazy Wisdom Community Journal* we ran a cover story called "Acupuncture Comes of Age in Ann Arbor." We received an unprecedented volume of comments from our readership about this feature. By and large, readers were glad we were covering this important and relevant topic to the holistic community, though many thought our coverage was not comprehensive enough, and, in fact, left out local practitioners of prominence, including Connie Sundrla of *The Parkway Center* and Cynthia Esseichick of *Ann Arbor Healing Arts*, among others.

We apologize for this. Our coverage did fall short. While we knew our practitioner list was not comprehensive, it was listed as if it were. We will be sensitive to such representations in the future and have learned many lessons along the way. Among them, that people are passionate about their practitioners and the wonderful work they are doing, and that acupuncture is an important topic in Ann Arbor that deserves further coverage.

To that aim, we are pleased to present an interview with Cynthia Esseichick, acupuncturist, Chinese herbalist, massage therapist, founder of *Ann Arbor Healing Arts*, and a long-time member of the Ann Arbor holistic community. Cynthia graciously accepted our invitation to speak with her about her practice and acupuncture's coming of age in Ann Arbor. We thank you, Cynthia, for agreeing to meet with us, and we thank all the readers who responded so passionately to our acupuncture feature. This truly is a community journal and your opinions matter.)

**Interviewed by Maureen McMahon
Photography by John Fredericks**

I had the pleasure of meeting with Cynthia Esseichick, Dipl. OM, LAC, MSTOM, at her beautiful office on Ann Arbor's south side. While you enter what seems like a standard office complex to get to her office, the setting of her Ann Arbor Healing Arts business is stunning. Tucked into the bottom of 325 E Eisenhower, it features floor to ceiling windows overlooking beautiful trees, a pond, and a waterfall, and is filled with natural light. One is immediately aware that this is a space for healing. Cynthia is gracious, intelligent, well-spoken, and humorous. I greatly enjoyed getting to know her and learning about her background in massage, her experiences with using acupuncture to treat cancer patients on Chicago's south side, and her views on Oriental Medicine and its place in Ann Arbor.

Maureen McMahon: Cynthia, you first founded Ann Arbor Healing Arts in 1990 in a different location downtown. What part of downtown were you in and why did you decide to have your business in this community? What was your focus then?

Cynthia Esseichick: I was in the heart of downtown, 4th & Washington. The openness in our community toward healing, the environment, politics, spirituality, and the supportive and generous attitude among healthcare practitioners (complementary, alternative, mainstream) made Ann Arbor a delightful place to practice.

My focus then, as now, has always been to promote optimal health and wellness. I began as a shiatsu practitioner, though I've never been attached to a particular modality in and of itself. It's an art to determine what might be the way in to healing. And the way in, as I see it, is guided by the patient, and by listening, assessment, and feedback. It's situational. Am I welcome here? Is this work appropriate here, now, for this individual? Intuition and tactile conversation are helpful tools. So is versatility. Energy medicine is dynamic and personal — what is happening now, what is the response now. It requires presence, being present — that's what I love about it.

Maureen McMahon: What brought about your decision to train in Oriental Medicine (OM)? Had you been exposed to acupuncture in the past? What drew you to it?

Cynthia Esseichick: I wanted to deepen the scope of my holistic healthcare practice, to offer more options to my patients. Dr. Jay Sandweiss has been a mentor to me. Jay's a phenomenal practitioner who artfully combines Eastern and Western biomedicine. He encouraged me to pursue my studies, and welcomed me into the fold. Jay inspired an appreciation for the science and the art of this medicine. (For more on Dr. Jay Sandweiss, D.O., see the Crazy Wisdom Interview from Fall 2008 on our online archive.)

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cabinets, the brightly colored boxes of tinctures, the smell of camphor, licorice, and incense. At that time, my best friend's mother was studying OM. It was mysterious and enchanting: piles of dank, smelly plant parts scattered about the kitchen table, incredibly detailed anatomical maps of meridians and acupuncture points. Like "Hogwarts," though well before Harry Potter.

My personal experience receiving acupuncture was profound. I saw this in others, too: amazing results. It was elegant and simple in its application, yet required complex theoretical understanding and scientific knowledge. I was drawn to the centuries of scholarship and history behind OM, to the fact that it worked, often in situations in which nothing else had. It was helpful. It was gentle. And a little bit magical.

Maureen McMahon: Where did you go to college, and where did you get your acupuncture training? What did you specialize in during your training?

Cynthia Esseichick: I received a Bachelor of Arts from Cornell University in Ithaca, NY, and a Master of Science in Oriental Medicine from the Pacific College of Oriental Medicine (P.C.O.M.) in Chicago. During my clinical training I treated a wide variety of issues: migraine, anxiety, allergies, insomnia. I also completed several specialized internships in orthopedics (pain), oncology, and infertility.

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MM: Did you feel that your background as a massage therapist influenced you during your training in Chicago?

Cynthia Esseichick: Absolutely. Familiarity with internal and external anatomy, and more specifically, years of hands-on experience working with the physical body meant that palpation, one of the primary diagnostic tools in OM, and the ability to sense point location for needle placement, came easily. It takes time to feel comfortable with touch and to develop what I call "tactile vision." From the start of my clinical training in Chicago, I felt at ease with my patients; this was absolutely due to the cumulative experience I had working as a massage therapist. Massage is probably the best pre-medical training any aspiring healthcare practitioner could have. It would be a fantastic pre-requisite for medical school. It amazes me that many practitioners treat the physical body yet rarely touch their patients.

MM: Where was your Clinical Internship and how did that impact your thoughts about access to care and the potential for acupuncture to benefit cancer patients?

Cynthia Esseichick: I spent 3 years in the P.C.O.M. clinic in Lakeview; a year and a half in the Breast Care Center at Mercy Hospital on Chicago's south side; and assisted several of my professors in their private clinics, one of whom was a fertility specialist in Evanston. My experience at Mercy Hospital was profound. Our patient population was largely comprised of people who, due to socio-economic disparity, might not know about alternative medicine, or who wouldn't necessarily be able to afford

it, if they had access to it. We provided acupuncture free of charge to any woman being treated for breast cancer at Mercy. It was an amazing opportunity to educate patients and physicians, to integrate acupuncture within a traditional, biomedical setting, and to offer gentle, effective care to anyone who needed it. And we got fantastic results. The oncologists and their patients loved what we were doing.

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MM: You have mentioned that in Eastern medicine there is a saying, “Diagnosis as treatment; treatment as diagnosis.” What is meant by this? Do you incorporate massage into your acupuncture treatments? Does this relate to treating the patient constitutionally?

Cynthia Esseichick: In OM, techniques such as pulse reading, hara diagnosis (abdominal palpation) or scanning the channels of the body for changes in temperature, tone, or texture, all involve contact. Because of the dynamic nature of touch, the body responds. If I’m palpating a point where I intend to insert a needle, there may be a response to the pressure of my palpation, or the temperature of my fingertips, and so, in the course of diagnostic assessment, treatment begins.

In instances where soft-tissue work makes sense, yes, massage may be used, as well as other accessory techniques such as guasha, cupping, or electro-stimulation. It really depends on the individual situation.

In OM, patients with similar issues, such as asthma, or migraine, might receive vastly different treatments based on individual constitutional variation and the root cause of their problem. There isn’t a set way to treat a specific issue; it varies from person to person, and sometimes from session to session. A frail person will receive a less vigorous treatment than someone more robust, and vice versa. This is real-time medicine: treating what is happening today, for this person, in this particular way. You can imagine why it has been so difficult to create proper clinical trials to assess the efficacy of OM.

MM: What are your areas of specialization now? What are you commonly treating people for?

Cynthia Esseichick: Infertility, women’s health, orthopedics/pain management, digestive issues, migraine, anxiety — my work is quite varied, which I love. It’s a tremendous amount of fun.

MM: Do you have patients of all ages, including children? Do you treat many Chinese people and, if so, are they generally more knowledgeable about acupuncture?

Cynthia Esseichick: I do. My patients include children, teenagers, adults, and seniors well into their 80’s. I treat quite a few Chinese people, and yes, they are often very familiar with acupuncture and Chinese herbs, as well as the nutritional concepts important in OM. In Chinese culture there is great appreciation of the importance of food as medicine.

MM: Do you treat Western medical doctors? Has anything surprised you about working with M.D.s, as patients or as referring physicians?

Cynthia Esseichick: Yes. My patients include M.D.s and D.O.s, many of whom are surprised by the extent of an acupuncturist’s education (P.C.O.M.’s program is 4 years, full-time, and includes a substantial number of courses in Western biomedicine). I’ve been pleasantly surprised by openness and recognition from M.D.s, by their willingness to refer patients, and to work collectively on certain issues. I’m even more surprised at how many come in for treatment because of what they’ve heard from their patients.

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MM: In our discussion about the similarities between acupressure and acupuncture, you mentioned a study published in *Archives of Internal Medicine* (May 11, 2009) in which some patients with lower back pain were given traditional acupuncture with needles, while others were given “sham” acupuncture, in which toothpicks were housed in needle guide tubes so participants couldn’t spot the sham. Both patient groups reported significant improvement in their disabilities brought about by back pain. What conclusions do you draw from this and how has this study been misinterpreted in your opinion?

Cynthia Esseichick: I love this study! One might conclude that there was no appreciable difference using acupuncture or a toothpick, and therefore, acupuncture is a sham, or certainly “no better than a toothpick.” In fact, the toothpicks are a brilliant demonstration of how responsive acupuncture points are to stimulation of any kind: acupressure, acupuncture, massage... Whether one received treatment via a needle or a toothpick isn’t really the issue, what’s important is that when the acupuncture points were stimulated, the response was “significant improvement” — that’s wonderful!

MM: When you treat people, do certain points elicit the same response on different people? If so, what would some examples be?



Cynthia Esseichick: I think what you’re referring to are unexpected responses, outside the intended goal of the treatment. Examples are people seeing specific colors or patterns or experiencing a fog lifting from their bodies. I find it curious because I don’t set up expectations for such things, yet the reporting of these phenomena tends to be fairly consistent with certain point prescriptions.

MM: Are your patients generally enthusiastic about taking herbs? Is there a fair amount of education that you have to provide them about the herbs?

Cynthia Esseichick: In my experience, folks are very enthusiastic about *the idea* of taking hand-crafted, centuries-old herbal formulas, tailor-made just for them. Then they try one. Yes, it may have licorice or cinnamon or mint. But the truth is, Chinese herbal formulas typically taste pretty intense. I try to explain the rationale, that it may be unpleasant, but that the bitter or astringent or sour flavors are medicinal. These formulas aren’t designed to taste good, they’re designed to effect positive change. And they do — they work wonders. There’s a Chinese saying, “the worse the herbs taste, the more benefit they bestow.” That’s hard for some folks to swallow.

MM: Do you think acupuncture has “come of age” in Ann Arbor? What are some of the advances you’ve seen and what are some of the challenges to its growth?

Cynthia Esseichick: I do. I see collaboration among mainstream physicians and alternative medicine practitioners, more integrative care for patients, which is fantastic. Challenges include educating people about how acupuncture works, what kinds of things can be treated, and overcoming the fear that it’s painful. Cost of care is another limiting factor. Why isn’t acupuncture a covered healthcare benefit? It’s effective, safe, and comparatively inexpensive.

MM: What are some of your interests outside of Oriental Medicine?

Cynthia Esseichick: I like to balance the quiet, intuitive, “yin” state of mind in which I work, with expressive, creative, or “yang” pursuits such as art and music. I’m a visual artist. I love opera. I spend time in nature. And I sing in the Ann Arbor-based band, Waynesboro.

MM: Great, thanks, Cynthia. It’s been a pleasure meeting you.

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Cynthia Esseichick, Dipl. OM, LAc, MSTOM, is Nationally Board Certified in Acupuncture, Chinese Herbal Medicine, and Traditional Oriental Medicine. She founded Ann Arbor Healing Arts, LLC, in 1990, and three years ago relocated it to 325 E Eisenhower Parkway, Suite 1, Ann Arbor, MI 48108. For more information about her work, visit www.annarborhealingarts.com. To schedule an appointment, call (734) 761-5402 or email Cynthia Esseichick at a2healingarts@gmail.com.

