Research Article

Electroacupuncture Reduces Carrageenan- and CFA-Induced Inflammatory Pain Accompanied by Changing the Expression of Nav1.7 and Nav1.8, rather than Nav1.9, in Mice Dorsal Root Ganglia

Chun-Ping Huang, 1 Hsiang-Ni Chen, 2,3 Hong-Lin Su, 1 Ching-Liang Hsieh, 2,4 Wei-Hsin Chen, 5 Zhen-Rung Lai, 6 and Yi-Wen Lin 2,4

1 Department of Life Sciences, National Chung Hsing University, Taichung, Taiwan
2 Graduate Institute of Acupuncture Science, China Medical University, 91 Hsueh-Shih Road, Taichung 40402, Taiwan
3 Division of Chinese Medicine, China Medical University Beigang Hospital, Yunlin, Taiwan
4 Acupuncture Research Center, China Medical University, Taichung, Taiwan
5 Graduate Institute of Biotechnology, National Chung Hsing University, Taichung, Taiwan
6 Department of Nursing, College of Medicine & Nursing, HungKuang University, Taichung, Taiwan

Correspondence should be addressed to Yi-Wen Lin; yiwenlin@mail.cmu.edu.tw

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Several voltage-gated sodium channels (Navs) from nociceptive nerve fibers have been identified as important effectors in pain signaling. The objective of this study is to investigate the electroacupuncture (EA) analgesia mechanism by changing the expression of Navs in mice dorsal root ganglia (DRG). We injected carrageenan and complete Freund’s adjuvant (CFA) into the mice plantar surface of the hind paw to induce inflammation and examined the antinociception effect of EA at the Zusanli (ST36) acupoint at 2 Hz low frequency. Mechanical hyperalgesia was evaluated by using electronic von Frey filaments, and thermal hyperalgesia was assessed using Hargreaves’ test. Furthermore, we observed the expression and quality of Navs in DRG neurons. Our results showed that EA reduced mechanical and thermal pain in inflammatory animal model. The expression of Nav1.7 and Nav1.8 was increased after 4 days of carrageenan- and CFA-elicited inflammatory pain and further attenuated by 2 Hz EA stimulation. The attenuation cannot be observed in Nav1.9 sodium channels. We demonstrated that EA at Zusanli (ST36) acupoint at 2 Hz low-frequency stimulation attenuated inflammatory pain accompanied by decreasing the expression of Nav1.7 and 1.8, rather than Nav1.9, sodium channels in peripheral DRG neurons.

1. Introduction

Recently, several studies have implied that voltage-gated sodium channels (Navs) from nociceptive nerve fibers have been identified as important effectors in pain signaling. The objective of this study is to investigate the electroacupuncture (EA) analgesia mechanism by changing the expression of Navs in mice dorsal root ganglia (DRG). We injected carrageenan and complete Freund’s adjuvant (CFA) into the mice plantar surface of the hind paw to induce inflammation and examined the antinociception effect of EA at the Zusanli (ST36) acupoint at 2 Hz low frequency. Mechanical hyperalgesia was evaluated by using electronic von Frey filaments, and thermal hyperalgesia was assessed using Hargreaves’ test. Furthermore, we observed the expression and quality of Navs in DRG neurons. Our results showed that EA reduced mechanical and thermal pain in inflammatory animal model. The expression of Nav1.7 and Nav1.8 was increased after 4 days of carrageenan- and CFA-elicited inflammatory pain and further attenuated by 2 Hz EA stimulation. The attenuation cannot be observed in Nav1.9 sodium channels. We demonstrated that EA at Zusanli (ST36) acupoint at 2 Hz low-frequency stimulation attenuated inflammatory pain accompanied by decreasing the expression of Nav1.7 and 1.8, rather than Nav1.9, sodium channels in peripheral DRG neurons.

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1. Introduction

Recently, several studies have implied that voltage-gated sodium channels (Navs) might be involved in the development of hyperalgesia produced by inflammation [1–3]. Sensory neurons innervating the muscles are considered to sense muscle pain, and Navs are reported to participate in the process of inflammatory pain. Intraplantar injection of carrageenan and CFA is well documented to produce edema, as well as mechanical and thermal hyperalgesia, and has often been used as an inflammatory pain model [1–4]. Sodium channel-induced currents have been identified in CNS neurons [3] and in DRG (dorsal root ganglia) neurons [2] which significantly influence the threshold for action potential firing.

Several voltage-gated sodium channels, Nav1.1, Nav1.3, Nav1.6, Nav1.7, Nav1.8, and Nav1.9, have been reported to express in DRG. Of these Navs, Nav1.8 and Nav1.9 have been reported to demonstrate resistance to TTX (tetrodotoxin), regarded as TTX-R (TTX-resistant) [2–5]. Nav1.7, Nav1.8,
and Nav1.9 are usually reported to be participating in inflamm-
ation pain and regulating neuron excitability [4]. Notably, previous animal studies have indicated that Nav1.3, Nav1.7, and Nav1.8 play prominent roles in inflammatory pain and
can be potentiated by microinjection of carrageenan and
CFA into intraplantar [1]. Studies on humans have shown
that Nav1.7 is crucial for physiological pain sensations, and
mutational alterations to Nav1.7 can result in severe chronic
pain sensations [6].

Acupuncture has been widely used for over 3000 years
and has been based on the principles of traditional Chinese
medicine. Acupuncture is known to stimulate the Aδ-fibers
[7] and modulate pain sensation by activating C-fibers
through the meridian [8]. Acupuncture can be used therapeu-
tically to treat diseases systematically [9]. The analgesic
effect of acupuncture is already widely accepted. Several
studies have suggested that acupuncture increases the release
of endogenous opiates [10], serotonin [II], and adenosine
to reduce pain [12]. Low-frequency electroacupuncture at
2 Hz induces enkephalins release to activate μ-receptors. In
contrast, high-frequency stimulation releases dynorphins to
activate δ-receptors [10].

Navs blockers are usually used for anesthesia and analge-
sia. To seek for more specific inhibitor with low side effects
is possible. The rationale of this study is that Nav1.7, Nav1.8,
and Nav1.9 are well known in inflammatory pain. The current
study examines the crucial role of NAvs and the effect of
2 Hz EA in mechanical and thermal hyperalgesia induced by
carrageenan and CFA. We hypothesized that EA could alter
expressions of NAvs in both carrageenan- and CFA-induced
inflammatory pain.

2. Methods

2.1. Animals and EA Pretreatment. Adult ICR female mice
aged 8 to 12 weeks were used in the experiment. The usage
of these animals was approved by the Institute of Animal
Care and Use Committee of China Medical University (Permit
no. 101-116-N), Taiwan, following the Guide for the use of
Laboratory Animals (National Academy Press). EA treatment
was applied using stainless steel needles (12 mm, 32 G, Yu
Kuang, Taiwan) which were inserted into the muscle layer
to a depth of 2-3 mm at ST36 acupoint, which is therapeutic
in both animal models and clinical study [11]. EA was
administered immediately after the injection of carrageenan
or CFA and performed every day at the same time (12:00–
14:00). A Trio-300 (Japan) stimulator delivered electrical
square pulses for 20 min with a 100 μs duration and a 2 Hz
frequency. The stimulation amplitude was 1 mA. The same
treatment was given to nonacupoint (the upper lateral glutal
muscle but not GB30 acupoint) to be set as the sham control
group entitled S-GM [13]. Another sham control group,
entitled S-Acu, was induced by needling into ST36 acupoint
without manipulation [14,15].

2.2. Inflammatory Pain Models. Mice were anesthetized
with 1.2% isoflurane and administered a single injection of
20 μL saline (pH 7.4, buffered with 20 mM HEPES), CFA
(0.5 mg/mL heat-killed M. tuberculosis Sigma, St. Louis, MO,
MSA), or 3% carrageenan (lambda carrageenan and CFA,
type IV; Sigma) in the plantar surface of the hind paw
to induce intraplantar inflammation. Behavior tests were
conducted at day 4 after induction of inflammation, and
DRGs were harvested after behavior tests.

2.3. Animal Behavior of Mechanical and Thermal Hyperal-
gesia. Mechanical sensitivities were tested at 4 days after
intraplantar injections. All experiments were performed at
30 min after EA (room temperature was approximately 25°C).
Mechanical sensitivity was measured by testing the force of
responses to stimulation with five applications of electronic
von Frey filaments (North Coast Medical, Gilroy, CA, USA).
Thermal pain was measured with five applications using
Hargreaves’ test IITC analgesiometer (IITC Life Sciences,
Woodland Hills, CA, USA). Both hot-induced pain and cold-
induced pain were measured using a hot/cold plate (IITC Life
Sciences, Woodland Hills, CA, USA). Total of eight mice were
used in each animal’s behavior per group.

2.4. Immunohistochemistry. Total of 6 mice were anesthetized
with an overdose of choral hydrate and intracardially perfu-
sed with saline followed by 4% paraformaldehyde. L3–L5
DRGs were immediately dissected and postfixed with 4%
paraformaldehyde. Similar protocols were used as previously
described [16]. DRGs were incubated with primary antibod-
ies prepared in blocking solution at 4°C overnight against
Nav1.7 (1:1000, Alomone), Nav1.8 (1:1000, Alomone), and
Nav1.9 (1:1000, Alomone). The secondary antibodies were
goat anti-rabbit (Molecular Probes, Carlsbad, CA, USA).
Slides were visualized by use of fluorescence-conjugated
secondary antibodies and mounted on cover slips.

2.5. Immunoblotting Assay. L3–L5 DRGs from 6 mice were
immediately excised to extract proteins. Total proteins were
prepared by homogenized DRG as previously described [13].
Peroxidase-conjugated anti-rabbit antibody (1:5000) was
used as a secondary antibody. The bands were visualized by
an enhanced chemiluminescent substrate kit (PIERCE) with
LAS-3000 Fujifilm (Fuji Photo Film Co. Ltd). Where applica-
table, the image intensities of specific bands were quantified
with NIH Imagej software (Bethesda, MD, USA).

2.6. Electrophysiology. L3–L5 DRGs were isolated from mice
with intraplantar saline, CFA, CFA with EA for 4 days.
DRG culture and settings for whole-cell patch recording
were as previously described [16]. The internal solution contained
(in mM) 10 NaCl, 110 CsCl, 20 tetraethylammonium-Cl,
2.5 MgCl₂, 5 EGTA, 3 Mg²⁺-ATP, and 5 HEPES, adjusted
to pH 7.2 with CsOH. The external solution contained (in
mM) 100 NaCl, 5 CsCl, 30 tetraethylammonium-Cl, 1.8
CaCl₂, 1 MgCl₂, 0.1 CdCl₂, 25 glucose, 5 4-aminopyridine,
and 5 HEPES, adjusted to pH 7.4 with HCl. Osmolarity
was adjusted to 300 mosm. Recordings were performed in
external solution with 500 nM TTX (Tocris, Avonmouth,
UK). TTX-R currents were evoked by a 50 ms test pulse
between −70 and 50 mV in 10-mV steps from a holding
potential of −70 mV. All recordings were obtained at room temperature (25°C) and completed within 24 h after plating.

2.7. Statistical Analysis. All statistic data are presented as the mean ± standard error. Statistical significance between control, inflammation, and EA group was tested using the ANOVA test, followed by a post hoc Tukey’s test (\(P < 0.05\) was considered statistically significant).

3. Results

3.1. Inflammatory Pain Models and Behavior. We first showed that intraplantar injection of normal saline did not induce
mechanical hyperalgesia to be set as a control group (Figure 1(a), \(2.82 \pm 0.26, n = 8\)). Intraplantar injection of carrageenan or CFA successfully produced mechanical hyperalgesia (Figure 1(a), \(0.81 \pm 0.21\) and \(1.12 \pm 0.13\) of carrageenan and CFA, \(n = 8, P < 0.01\)). Low-frequency 2-Hz EA at ST36 reliably attenuated carrageenan- and CFA-induced hyperalgesia (Figure 1(a), \(1.24 \pm 0.12\) and \(1.50 \pm 0.18\) of carrageenan and CFA, \(n = 8, P < 0.01\)). The phenomenon was not observed neither in S-GM (Figure 1(a), \(1.25 \pm 0.10\) of carrageenan and CFA, \(n = 8, P > 0.05\)) nor in S-Acu group (Figure 1(a), \(0.92 \pm 0.13\) and \(1.25 \pm 0.10\) of carrageenan and CFA, \(n = 8, P > 0.05\)). We further showed that thermal hyperalgesia was observed in carrageenan-induced inflammatory mice (Figure 1(b), \(7.14 \pm 0.72\) s and \(12.1 \pm 1.49\) s of carrageenan and control, \(n = 8, P < 0.01\)). The same phenomenon was also evoked in CFA-induced inflammatory mice (Figure 1(b), \(5.94 \pm 0.38, n = 8, P < 0.01\)). Both mechanical and thermal hyperalgesia can be reduced by EA at ST36 (Figure 1(b), \(12.69 \pm 0.97\) and \(10.17 \pm 1.42\) of carrageenan and CFA, \(n = 8, P < 0.01\)). The therapeutic effect was not obtained neither in S-GM (Figure 1(b), \(5.91 \pm 0.54\) and \(3.59 \pm 0.36\) of carrageenan and CFA, \(n = 8, P > 0.05\)) nor in S-Acu group (Figure 1(b), \(4.31 \pm 0.31\) and \(3.56 \pm 0.31\) of carrageenan and CFA, \(n = 8, P > 0.05\)).

3.2. Thermal Hyperalgesia on the Hot and Cold Plate. Our results displayed that noxious heat can induce thermal pain with a decreased duration of forepaw licking (Figure 1(c), \(4.17 \pm 1.05\) and \(6.67 \pm 2.01\) of carrageenan and CFA, \(n = 8, P < 0.01\)). The phenotype can be attenuated by EA at ST36 (Figure 1(c), \(10.67 \pm 3.69\) and \(16.67 \pm 2.11\) of carrageenan and CFA, \(n = 8, P < 0.01\)). Similar results can also be obtained from criteria regarding jumping analysis. The phenotype was not observed neither in S-GM (Figure 1(c), \(5.83 \pm 1.07\) and \(6.83 \pm 1.17\) of carrageenan and CFA, \(n = 8, P > 0.05\)) nor in S-Acu group (Figure 1(c), \(5.60 \pm 1.17\) and \(8.40 \pm 1.03\) of carrageenan and CFA, \(n = 8, P > 0.05\)). The number of jumping instances increased after inflammation treatment (Figure 1(d), \(84.83 \pm 8.37\) and \(86.83 \pm 9.09\) of carrageenan and CFA, \(n = 8, P < 0.01\)). Both carrageenan- and CFA-induced thermal pain can be further ameliorated by EA stimulation (Figure 1(d), \(38.67 \pm 9.49\) and \(44.5 \pm 6.09\) of carrageenan and CFA, \(n = 8, P < 0.01\)). The effect was not obtained neither in S-GM (Figure 1(d), \(68.75 \pm 5.43\) and \(68.40 \pm 12.91\) of carrageenan and CFA, \(n = 8, P > 0.05\)) nor in S-Acu group (Figure 1(d), \(69.60 \pm 18.74\) of carrageenan and CFA, \(n = 8, P > 0.05\)). Our results also show that cold hyperalgesia was induced by carrageenan, and CFA intraplantar injection was analyzed with hind paw withdrawal number (Figure 1(e), \(3.33 \pm 0.56\) and \(4.83 \pm 1.14\) of carrageenan and CFA, \(n = 8, P < 0.01\)). Accordingly, similar curative effects of EA were observed in both carrageenan- and CFA-induced inflammatory mice (Figure 1(e), \(0.83 \pm 0.48\) and \(1.67 \pm 0.67\) of carrageenan and CFA, \(n = 8, P < 0.01\)). The effect was not obtained neither in S-GM (Figure 1(e), \(2.50 \pm \)
Figure 3: Nav1.7 and Nav1.8 expressions were increased in ipsilateral DRGs after intraplantar CFA injection and further attenuated by EA at the ST36 acupoint in mice, though Nav1.9 was not different. (a)–(c) Nav1.7, Nav1.8, and Nav1.9 immunoreactive neurons were found in lumbar DRGs at the ipsilateral site of the saline-injected group. (d)–(e) Nav1.7 and Nav1.8 immunoreactive neurons were increased in the CFA-injected group, but (f) Nav1.9 immunoreactive neurons were not increased. (g)–(h) CFA-induced increases of Nav1.7 and Nav1.8 were attenuated by EA, as compared to those of the CFA-induced group. (i) Nav1.9 immunoreactive neurons were not altered by EA at the ipsilateral site of inflammation. (j)–(k) Nav1.7 and Nav1.8 immunoreactive neurons were increased in the S-Acu group. (l) Nav1.9 immunoreactive neurons were not altered in the S-Acu group. (m)–(n) Nav1.7 and Nav1.8 immunoreactive neurons were increased in the S-GM group. (o) Nav1.9 immunoreactive neurons were not altered in the S-GM group. Scale bar = 50 um.

0.50 and 4.20 ± 1.24 of carrageenan and CFA, n = 8, P > 0.05) nor in S-Acu group (Figure 1(e), 2.67 ± 0.33 and 3.0 ± 0.45 of carrageenan and CFA, n = 8, P > 0.05). Cold hyperalgesia was induced by carrageenan, and CFA intraplantar injection was analyzed with rearing number (Figure 1(f), 3.0 ± 0.45 and 4.33 ± 0.33 of carrageenan and CFA, n = 8, P < 0.01). Accordingly, similar curative effects of EA were observed in both carrageenan- and CFA-induced inflammatory mice (Figure 1(e), 1.17 ± 0.31 and 2.83 ± 0.75 of carrageenan and CFA, n = 8, P < 0.01). The effect was not obtained neither in S-GM (Figure 1(f), 4.60 ± 1.29 and 5.0 ± 0.80 of carrageenan and CFA, n = 8, P > 0.05) nor in S-Acu group (Figure 1(f), 5.33 ± 1.31 and 4.67 ± 0.88 of carrageenan and CFA, n = 8, P > 0.05).

3.3. Immunohistochemistry Expression of Navs in DRG Neurons. Our data showed that Nav1.7 sodium channels were distributed in L3–L5 DRG neurons (Figures 2(a) and 3(a)). Intraplantar injection of carrageenan or CFA reliably increased the expression of Nav1.7 sodium channels in L3–L5 DRGs (Figures 2(d) and 3(d)). Dramatically, Nav1.7 channels were negatively regulated to a normal level by applying 2 Hz EA treatment at ST36 acupoint (Figures 2(g) and 3(g)). EA-elicited downregulation of Nav 1.7 was not observed neither in sham-Acu (Figures 2(j) and 3(j)) nor in sham-GM groups (Figures 2(m) and 3(m)). Our results also show that Nav1.8 channels were expressed in DRG neurons in saline-injected neurons (Figures 2(b) and 3(b)). With the injection of carrageenan or CFA, Nav1.8 channels were greatly increased in DRG neurons (Figures 2(e) and 3(e)). The phenomenon was similar to previous results [2]. Importantly, 2 Hz EA at ST36 significantly reverses the overexpression of Nav1.8 channels in DRG neurons (Figures 2(h) and 3(h)). The effects were not obtained from sham-Acu (Figures 2(k) and 3(k)) and sham-GM groups (Figures 2(n) and 3(n)). EA at ST36 significantly reverses the overexpression of Nav1.8 channels in DRG neurons (Figures 2(h) and 3(h)). The effects were not obtained from sham-Acu (Figures 2(k) and 3(k)) and sham-GM groups (Figures 2(n) and 3(n)). EA at ST36 significantly reverses the overexpression of Nav1.8 channels in DRG neurons (Figures 2(h) and 3(h)). The effects were not obtained from sham-Acu (Figures 2(k) and 3(k)) and sham-GM groups (Figures 2(n) and 3(n)). EA at ST36 significantly reverses the overexpression of Nav1.8 channels in DRG neurons (Figures 2(h) and 3(h)). The effects were not obtained from sham-Acu (Figures 2(k) and 3(k)) and sham-GM groups (Figures 2(n) and 3(n)).

3.4. Immunoblotting Quality of Navs in DRG Neurons. We further showed that Nav1.7 and Nav1.8 channels were increased during carrageenan- and CFA-induced inflammatory pain in mice L3–L5 DRGs by using western blot technique (Figures 4(a) and 4(b)). In contrast, the expression of Nav1.9 sodium channels was not changed in this condition (Figure 4(c)). Our results suggested that Nav1.7 channels were attenuated by 2 Hz EA at ST36 acupoint in carrageenan- and CFA-induced inflammation pain (Figure 4(a)) displayed
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Figure 4: Nav1.7 and Nav1.8 protein levels were increased in lumbar DRGs in both intraplantar carrageenan- and CFA-induced inflammation and further attenuated by EA at the ST36 acupoint in mice, but Nav1.9 proteins were not altered. (a) DRGs lysates were immunoreactive with specific antibodies to Nav1.7 and a substantially increased signal at the ipsilateral site, as compared to that of the saline-injected group. Nav1.7 protein levels were attenuated by EA at the ST36 acupoint, as compared to that of the carrageenan- and CFA-induced groups. (b) Nav1.8 displayed similar results to Nav1.7. The protein levels of S-Acu and S-GM were similar to inflamed but not EA group. (c) Nav1.9 protein levels were not changed in both the carrageenan- and CFA-injected sites. Nav1.9 protein levels were not attenuated by EA at the ST36 acupoint, as compared to those of the carrageenan- and CFA-induced groups, either. Nav1.9 proteins were not altered at the ipsilateral site of inflammation and EA stimulation.

4. Discussion

In this study, we first established animal models of inflammatory pain by injection of carrageenan or CFA into hind paw. Animals with inflammatory pain showed mechanical and thermal hyperalgesia using a von Frey filament test, Hargreaves' test, and hot/cold plate tests. EA stimulation at the ST36 acupoint reduced inflammatory hyperalgesia in both carrageenan and CFA groups. Our results indicated that Nav1.7 and 1.8, but not Nav1.9, were upregulated in both carrageenan and CFA-induced hyperalgesia, which suggested the important role of Nav1.7 and 1.8 in inflammatory pain. We showed that EA at Zusanli (ST36) acupoint at 2 Hz low-frequency stimulation reduced pain thresholds accompanied by decreasing the expression of Nav1.7 and 1.8, rather than Nav1.9, sodium channels in DRG neurons.

Zhang et al. reported that EA at 10 Hz frequency significantly reduced CFA-induced hind paw edema. Moreover, EA attenuates inflammatory response through the hypothalamus-pituitary-adrenal axis (HPA) and the nervous system [14]. Recently, EA also suppresses the expression of neurokinin-1 in spinal cord dorsal horn induced by inflammation in rats [15]. These phenomena were not observed in sham control groups suggesting the acupoint-specific effect [14, 15]. Our results were consistent with these studies that...
the antinociceptive effect was only observed in EA but not in sham-Acu and sham-GM groups.

Numerous studies have investigated the role of different Navs in pain, neuron excitability, and action potential firing [4, 17]. The most emphatic evidence implicating a specific ion channel participating in pain comes from studies on complete insensitivity to pain using gene knock mice [18, 19]. Nav1.7 was greatly expressed in C-fiber free nerve endings, playing a crucial role in nociceptive information [20]. Recent studies have strongly supported Navs as potential analgesic drugs, according to antisense and knockout mice [6, 21]. Derivatives from benzazepine and imidazopyridine were also developed to block Nav1.7 channels for pain treatment [22]. Our results clearly indicate that EA reliably attenuated carrageenan- and CFA-induced inflammation pain by ameliorating Nav1.7 overexpression. This is the first paper regarding the functional role of acupuncture in pain manipulation and its novel findings pertaining to Nav1.7 channel alteration.

Chronic intrathecal Nav1.8 antisense injection successfully attenuated the Nav1.8-induced current and decreased mechanical allodynia after intraplantar CFA injection [23]. Developing a specific Navs channel blocker is possible for inflammatory pain. A-803467 is a novel specific blocker for the Nav1.8 channel and can ameliorate inflammatory pain in rats [24]. Nav1.9 is a TTX-R sodium channel greatly expressed in small diameter C-fibers and contributes to membrane properties, particularly in nociceptive neurons [25]. Nav1.9 is also suggested to regulate inflammatory pain thresholds [26]. Animal behavior studies have also demonstrated that deletion of Nav1.9 channel expression prevents inflammatory mediator-induced hyperalgesia [27, 28]. Inflammatory mediators, such as PGE₃, can reliably increase the Nav1.9 channel current in mice DRG neurons with G-protein activation [29]. Our data provide highly valuable results from investigating inflammation pain regarding ancient acupuncture mechanisms that can be further applied to clinical medicine.

**Conflict of Interests**

The authors have no conflict of interests.

**Acknowledgments**

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