Therapeutic effects of different durations of acupuncture on rats with middle cerebral artery occlusion

Chao Zhang¹, Yan Wen², Xiao-nong Fan¹, ³, ⁴, ⁵, Guang Tian¹, Xue-yi Zhou³, Shi-zhe Deng³, Zhi-hong Meng², ³, ⁴

¹ First Teaching Hospital of Tianjin University of Traditional Chinese Medicine, Tianjin, China
² Post-graduate School, Tianjin University of Traditional Chinese Medicine, Tianjin, China
³ Acupuncture and Moxibustion Research Institute of Tianjin University of Traditional Chinese Medicine, Tianjin, China
⁴ Key Laboratory of Cerebropathy Acupuncture Therapy of State Administration of Traditional Chinese Medicine, Tianjin, China
⁵ Tianjin Key Laboratory of Acupuncture & Moxibustion Science, Tianjin, China
⁶ Three-level Laboratory of Acupuncture Dose-Effect Relationship, State Administration of Traditional Chinese Medicine, Tianjin, China

Abstract
Acupuncture is regarded as an effective therapy for cerebral ischemia. Different acupuncture manipulations and durations may result in different therapeutic effects. In the present study, the Neiguan (PC6) acupoint of rats with occluded middle cerebral arteries was needled at a fixed frequency (3 Hz) with different durations, i.e., 5, 60 and 180 seconds under a twisting-rotating acupuncture method. Results showed that different durations of acupuncture had different therapeutic effects, with 60 seconds yielding a better therapeutic effect than the other two groups. This duration of treatment demonstrated rapid cerebral blood flow, encouraging recovery of neurological function, and small cerebral infarct volume. Experimental findings indicated that under 3 Hz frequency, the treatment of needling Neiguan for 60 seconds is effective for ischemic stroke.

Key Words: nerve regeneration; middle cerebral artery occlusion; manipulation; Neiguan; cerebral infarction volume; twisting-rotating method; duration; frequency; cerebral blood flow; neural regeneration

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Introduction
Acupuncture therapy has been proven as an effective means in treating cerebral ischemia. Previous studies have indicated that acupuncture exerts therapeutic effects in promoting cerebral blood flow (Qian et al., 2009; Du et al., 2011; Kim et al., 2013), preventing apoptosis of nerve cells (Zhou et al., 2011a; Wang et al., 2012), improving neurobehavioral performance (Chang et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2012) and regulating protein and gene expression (Guo et al., 2004; Lin and Hsieh, 2010; Fan et al., 2012). According to the theory of acupuncture and moxibustion in traditional Chinese medicine, the Neiguan (PC6) acupoint is the collateral acupoint of the Pericardium Meridian of Hand Jueyin, and the Pericardium Meridian is the main vessel of the heart that governs blood circulation in the whole body (Liu et al., 2013). Therefore, acupuncture at the Neiguan acupoint has the effect of regulating blood circulation in the brain. Modern research has also shown that acupuncture at the Neiguan acupoint could produce specific therapeutic effects in the treatment of ischemic stroke (Fan et al., 2009; Zhou et al., 2011b). According to evidence-based research, the Neiguan acupoint was found to be one of the ten most frequently used acupoints in the treatment of ischemic stroke (Li, 2009).

In both laboratory and clinical studies, acupuncture manipulation has been overlooked compared with other factors, such as the selection of acupoints or acupuncture methods. The variation of acupuncture manipulations by different acupuncture operators in these studies makes it difficult to achieve uniform standards for acupuncture manipulation. Whether the impact of acupuncture manipulation on therapeutic efficacy is significant or not is a question of great concern for acupuncture researchers. As a physical stimulus, acupuncture creates a particular level of stimulation and acupuncture manipulation is the approach to regulate the amount of stimulation. Acupuncture manipulation is an extensive concept that includes duration, frequency, angle, depth and other aspects. Duration, the operating time of acupuncture, is one of the most commonly used factors in the regulation of acupuncture manipulation, so the present study selected duration as a representative factor to explore the impact of acupuncture manipulation on the efficacy of acupuncture. In previous studies, needling Neiguan using the thrusting-lifting method to treat cerebral ischemia showed
Figure 1: Effects of different durations of acupuncture on neurological deficit scores in rats with middle cerebral artery occlusion. Results are expressed as the mean ± SD of 18 rats in each group. One-way analysis of variance was used to compare differences between groups, and the least significant difference test was used to compare between two groups. *P < 0.05, vs. normal group; #P < 0.05, vs. model group; †P < 0.05, vs. non-acupuncture group; §P < 0.05, vs. 60 seconds acupuncture group. I: Normal group; II: sham group; III: model group; IV: non-acupuncture group; V: 5 seconds acupuncture group; VI: 60 seconds acupuncture group; VII: 180 seconds acupuncture group.

Figure 2: Effects of different durations of acupuncture on cerebral blood flow in rats with middle cerebral artery occlusion. Results are expressed as the mean ± SD of 18 rats in each group. One-way analysis of variance was used to compare differences between groups, and the least significant difference test was used to compare between two groups. *P < 0.05, vs. normal group; #P < 0.05, vs. model group; †P < 0.05, vs. non-acupuncture group; §P < 0.05, vs. 60 seconds acupuncture group. I: Normal group; II: sham group; III: model group; IV: non-acupuncture group; V: 5 seconds acupuncture group; VI: 60 seconds acupuncture group; VII: 180 seconds acupuncture group.

Figure 3: Effects of different durations of acupuncture on cerebral infarction volume in middle cerebral artery occlusion rats. (A) Cerebral infarction volume in middle cerebral artery occlusion rats following 2,3,5-triphenyltetrazolium chloride staining. The white area is infarct region and red is normal tissue. (B) Cerebral infarction volume ratio of middle cerebral artery occlusion rats. Results are expressed as the mean ± SD of 18 rats in each group. One-way analysis of variance was used to compare differences between groups, and the least significant difference test was used to compare between two groups. *P < 0.05, vs. normal group; #P < 0.05, vs. model group; †P < 0.05, vs. non-acupuncture group; §P < 0.05, vs. 60 seconds acupuncture group. I: Normal group; II: sham group; III: model group; IV: non-acupuncture group; V: 5 seconds acupuncture group; VI: 60 seconds acupuncture group; VII: 180 seconds acupuncture group.
affirmative therapeutic outcomes, with different parameters of duration and frequencies varying in therapeutic effects (Zhang et al., 2013b). To further prove the significance of acupuncture manipulation to acupuncture effects, the present study adopted the twisting-rotating method to treat a rat model of middle cerebral artery occlusion by needling the Neiguan acupoint, in a broader attempt to determine the preferable duration of needling Neiguan to treat ischemic stroke.

Materials and Methods

Animals

Male, specific pathogen-free Wistar rats, aged 3 months and weighing 250–300 g were provided from the Laboratory Animal Center of People's Liberation Army Academy of Military Medical Sciences, Beijing, China (license No. SCXK (Army) 2007-004). Animals were acclimated to the animal quarters for at least 3 days before the experiments, and were allowed standard laboratory diet and water ad libitum. The investigation conformed to the Guide for the Care and Use of Laboratory Animals published by the US National Institutes of Health (NIH publication No. 85-23, revised 1996), and the experimental protocol was approved by the Animal Ethics Committee of Tianjin University of Traditional Chinese Medicine in China.

A total of 126 rats were randomly and equally assigned to seven groups: control, sham, model, non-acupuncture, and 5, 60 or 180 seconds of acupuncture.

Establishing middle cerebral artery occlusion models

A modified Zea-longa's thread ligation method (Longa et al., 1989) was applied to duplicate the middle cerebral artery occlusion model. Briefly, rats in the model, non-acupuncture, 5 seconds acupuncture, 60 seconds acupuncture and 180 seconds acupuncture groups were fasted for 12 hours with free access to water and anesthetized by intraperitoneal injection of 10% hydration chloral hydrate (350 mg/kg). Rats were then fixed in the dorsal position on the surgery board, neck skin and muscle were incised, and the common carotid artery and the proximal end (near the heart) of the common carotid artery were isolated. The external carotid artery, the external carotid artery and the internal carotid artery on the left were isolated. The external carotid artery and the proximal end (near the heart) of the common carotid artery were ligated with No. 0 suture line. A small hole was pierced with a 1 mL syringe needle at the proximal end of the common carotid. A 0.28 mm nylon thread was inserted from the hole into the internal carotid until resistance was met, with an intracranial depth of 18–20 mm. Blood flow in the left middle cerebral artery was blocked by the nylon thread. The nylon thread was then ligated with the common carotid artery and muscle and skin were sutured. The nylon thread was not applied in rats of the sham group. Once the animals recovered, they were returned to their cages with food and water available ad libitum. This intraluminal suture model of the middle cerebral artery occlusion produces reliable and permanent focal cerebral ischemia.

Acupuncture intervention

In the 5, 60, and 180 seconds acupuncture groups, the Neiguan acupoint on the right side was needled with different durations, i.e., 5, 60 and 180 seconds, under the same twisting-rotating frequency (3 Hz). In the normal, sham and non-acupuncture groups, rats did not receive any acupuncture intervention, but were also handled six times with the acupuncture groups in the experimental period. According to the Acupoint Location of Commonly-used Experimental Animals in Experimental Acupuncture Science (Li, 2003), the Neiguan acupoint was located at the forefoot, between the ulna and the radius, about 3 mm from the joint. Sterile disposable stainless steel needles (length: 40 mm, diameter: 0.30 mm; Hwatuo, Suzhou Medical Supplies Factory Co., Ltd., Suzhou, China) were used in this study. All acupuncture manipulation was performed by a twisting-rotating controlled acupuncture machine (Haifu Technology Co., Ltd., Chongqing, China). The Neiguan acupoint was perpendicularly needled to a depth of 2 mm. Rats were needled for the first time after they regained consciousness from anesthesia (normally 3–5 hours after middle cerebral artery occlusion surgery) and received five more acupuncture treatments in the subsequent 72 hours.

In the model group, rats did not receive any acupuncture intervention. Rats in this group underwent neurobehavioral testing and cerebral blood flow detection as soon as they recovered from anesthesia. They were then decapitated to allow for cerebral infarction volume measurement. Observations were performed immediately after modeling in the model group, and at 72 hours after modeling in the non-acupuncture group.

Evaluation of neurological function

Deficits in neurological function were assessed according to the Zausinger’s 6-point method (Zausinger et al., 2000) after middle cerebral artery occlusion rats recovered from anesthesia. The standards used to obtain the Zausinger six-point score were as follows: 0, the rat could not spontaneously walk; 1, the rat rotated towards the side opposite to the lesion with free walking; 2, the rat rotated towards the side opposite to the lesion when its tail was seized; 3, the resistance to the lateral pressure was decreased in the side opposite to the lesion; 4, the rat could not unbend front paws or entire forelimb on the side opposite to the lesion; 5, the rat had no neurological function defect. Rats with a score of 1–3 were considered to have undergone successful cerebral ischemia injury and rats with a score of 0, 4 or 5 were not used for further experimentation. All rats were assessed at 72 hours after modeling.

Detection of cerebral blood flow

Cerebral blood flow detection was performed at 72 hours after modeling in all groups but the model group. Rats were fixed on a self-made stereotaxic instrument after anesthesia. A midline incision was made on the scalp to expose the anterior fontanel. A small bone window 1 mm posterior to the anterior fontanel and 3 mm left of the midline was produced with a dental drill. The measurement probe was placed on the left cerebral hemisphere. Cerebral blood flow was continuously measured by laser Doppler flowmetry (DRT4, Moor...
Compared with normal and sham groups, cerebral blood flow in rats with middle cerebral artery occlusion was significantly increased (P < 0.05). Compared with the model group, cerebral blood flow in the rats from all three acupuncture groups was significantly increased (P < 0.05). Compared with the 5 seconds acupuncture group and 180 seconds acupuncture group, cerebral blood flow in the rats of the 60 seconds acupuncture group was also significantly increased (P < 0.05). Cerebral blood flow in rats from the 5 seconds acupuncture group and 180 seconds acupuncture group showed no significant difference (P > 0.05; Figure 2).

Effects of different durations of acupuncture on cerebral infarction volume of middle cerebral artery occlusion rats

Cerebral infarction was clearly seen in the model group (P < 0.05) and infarction volume was reduced in all three acupuncture groups (P < 0.05), while no infarction was observed in the normal and sham groups. Cerebral infarction volume in rats from the model group, non-acupuncture group, 5 seconds acupuncture group and 180 seconds acupuncture group were similar (P > 0.05). Compared with the non-acupuncture group, cerebral infarction volume in rats from the 60 seconds acupuncture group was significantly decreased (P < 0.05). Compared with the 5 seconds acupuncture group and 180 seconds acupuncture group, cerebral infarction volume in rats from the 60 seconds acupuncture group was also significantly decreased (P < 0.05). Cerebral infarction volume in rats from the 5 seconds acupuncture group and 180 seconds acupuncture group showed no significant difference (P > 0.05; Figure 3).

Discussion

The middle cerebral artery occlusion animal model has been proven to be a classic model of human cerebral ischemia (Zhang and Ben, 2012; Sun et al., 2013; Zhang et al., 2013a; Du et al., 2014; Mei and Zhang, 2014). In our study, the middle cerebral artery occlusion rat model was successfully induced using the previously described Zea-longa's thread ligation method (Longa et al., 1989) and evaluated later by neurobehavioral scores. Apparent ischemic areas in the brain samples were also shown using TTC staining methods. The model group showed significant differences in neurobehavioral scores, cerebral blood flow and cerebral infarction volume compared with normal and sham groups. No difference was seen between normal and sham groups.

The therapeutic effect of acupuncture on stroke is still controversial, and relevant meta-analysis shows that acupuncture therapy does not bring extra effects in addition to physical training or placebo (Sze et al., 2002; Hopwood et al., 2008; Kong et al., 2010), while other studies show acupuncture can produce certain beneficial effects in the treatment of stroke (Wu et al., 2010; Zhang et al., 2014). Considering the ability to spontaneously recover after stroke (Cramer, 2008; Colombo et al., 2013), we specifically added a non-acupuncture group in this study. Results showed that even though the non-acupuncture group revealed a trend towards recov-
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Conflicts of interest: None declared.

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Author contributions: ZHM and XNF conceived the study and prepared the initial protocol. CZ drafted the manuscript and participated in the study design. YW and XYZ participated in completing the study. GT and SZD helped to analyze the data. All authors approved the final version of the manuscript.

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