Is acupuncture a real alternative treatment for mild apnea?

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TO THE EDITOR:

The article entitled “Acupuncture in obstructive sleep apnea/hypopnea syndrome: a case report with fifteen months of follow-up”¹, published by Bencz and Nabarro in this issue of Sleep Science provides surprising data regarding the efficacy of acupuncture as a treatment for mild apnea. Our amazement is mainly due to the long term maintenance of these effects, since previous studies showed only acute effects or effects sustained by continuous treatment²,³.

Based on the impact of the presented data, some methodological caveats shall be stressed out, in order to guarantee its applicability. First, it is convenient to keep caution concerning data generalization. Sleep apnea has a multifactorial pathogenesis and we do not believe that acupuncture would be effective in all causes for this disorder. For example, it is not plausible to suppose that acupuncture will have any effect upon sleep-disordered breathing caused by structural malformations, such as retrognatia. We judge that obesity or hypotonia/flaccidity of pharyngeal musculature are the main causes of apnea that are prone to be treated by acupuncture. In the reported case, both conditions are possible, as the patient presented overweight and abnormal pharyngeal airspaces at the beginning of the treatment. However, to fully conclude about acupuncture efficiency regardless of weight loss, the authors should provide Body Mass Index and cephalometric data during the whole follow up. Even so, we must keep in mind that this is a case report and, thus, there is no certainty that these results would be replicated in a large sample. Moreover, since there is no control group, it is not possible to infer if this long term effects were due to acupuncture per se or by other factors, such as behavioral changes or improvements in lifestyle. Hence, would be interesting to reproduce the protocol employed in this case in a larger sample, intending to evaluate if the presented data were casual or if they are extendable to other individuals.

Further studies addressing this topic with large samples would provide an additional promising approach, and be welcome to sleep medicine. Obstructive sleep apnea is a highly prevalent condition⁴. In special, mild obstructive apnea is a condition that deserves attention, since it is underdiagnosed and undertreated⁵,⁶. Furthermore, the low compliance for standard treatment approaches stimulates the applicability of alternative or complementary therapies, such as acupuncture, in these cases. Finally, specifically to Brazilian population, these results would be remarkably relevant, as since 2006 the public health system encompasses acupuncture in its programs.

REFERENCES