

BABY
Elizabeth Heubeck

Point Well Taken

Acupuncture Helps Manage Symptoms of Pregnancy and Labor

As happens with so many birthing plans, Beth Shrader's didn't go quite as expected. She had hoped to deliver her baby naturally, without the aid of pharmaceuticals.

But after 12 hours of intense laboring, she accepted an epidural, only to relax her enough to sleep so she would have the strength to continue laboring. That she did, in the face of painful contractions, regular vomiting and a cervix that wasn't dilating.

An unlikely source of support—at least in Baltimore hospitals—guided Shrader through her turbulent 36-hour labor.

Shrader credits acupuncturist Dominic Thomas, M.S.O.M., L.Ac., with enabling her to cope as well as she did.

"I'm pretty sure I would have run out of steam much earlier without his help," Shrader recounts.

Thomas was hired in November 2005 by St. Joseph Medical Center to offer pain relief during labor and to manage symptoms of pregnancy. He also sees patients at Women's Health Associates in Towson.

Shrader also believes that Thomas helped her avoid having an emergency cesarean section. During labor, Thomas showed Shrader's family members how to perform acupressure on her. A close cousin to acupuncture, acupressure requires the application of manual pressure—rather than the insertion of thin needles—to specific areas of the body.

"In spite of regular strong contractions, I wasn't dilating. [Then] my family took turns for five hours at the pressure points he showed them and I dilated to 10 centimeters. Without Dominic and his skills, I very well may have ended up having an emergency c-section," Shrader says.

How It Works

"In terms of pain management, acupuncture improves circulation and promotes the release of natural pain killers, or endorphins, and natural opiates," Thomas says.

Recent research illustrates the effect of acu-

puncture on the brain's pain centers. Using an imaging technique called single photon emission computed tomography, University of Pennsylvania Medical Center researchers viewed the brains of four people with pain. Computerized images showed an increase in blood flow to the thalamus (part of brain that relays pain and other sensory messages) after needles were inserted.

Researchers also have documented direct correlations between acupressure and its effects on labor and delivery. One study that was published in the *Journal of Alternative Complementary Medicine* found that, com-

pared to simply touching a given pressure point, acupressure applied to that same point resulted in significantly reduced pain (as measured by patients' responses) and a shorter delivery time. No analgesics were administered during the study period.

For Symptoms of Pregnancy

Acupuncture during pregnancy isn't just for labor and delivery.

"It really is a management process. I want to work with women

from no later than 24 weeks before their due date. It helps to establish a relationship, check their response to acupuncture. It also provides a case history leading up to the big day," Thomas says.

According to Thomas, acupuncture treatment during pregnancy is a matter of restoring the body's balance.

"Nausea, for instance, is the result of an imbalance in the digestive system. If there's not an underlying pathology—if it's just pregnancy-related hormones—acupuncture can act as a catalyst, helping the body try to reach balance," he explains.

In the journal *Birth*, investigators reported on a study in which 593 women in their first trimester of pregnancy received traditional acupuncture. Subjects were divided between pregnant women who received acupuncture and those who did not. The women who received acupuncture reported having less fre-

quent and shorter periods of nausea than



other symptoms caused by fluctuating hormonal levels during pregnancy.

Julia Rasmuson, mother of a toddler and expecting, had a history of migraines. With her second pregnancy, they increased dramatically.

"One lasted for two weeks. I was completely down for four days," she recalls.

She knew some of the stronger drugs commonly used to treat migraines were contraindicated during pregnancy, and she turned to her OB/GYN for a suggestion. Her doctor recommended that she see Thomas.

"Within three to four sessions, the migraines were improved. Now, they're completely gone," says Rasmuson, who has not suffered any recurring headaches.

Shrader also developed sciatica during her pregnancy, which was so painful that she was on the verge of quitting her job as a college professor.

"I could barely walk," she says.

Having been treated with acupuncture for asthma, she decided to try it for her sciatica.

"Literally, in one treatment, it was gone," she says.

But How Safe?

Acupuncturists report that the practice of acupuncture is safe for both mother and fetus when practiced by a

licensed practitioner of acupuncture.

"There are specific [acupuncture] points to be avoided, because they could be used to induce labor," Thomas says.

If a practitioner were to induce premar labor, he explains, it would be considered gross misconduct, as the points that can activate labor are well known to licensed acupuncture professionals.

"There has never been an adverse report [to a fetus]," Thomas says, adding that he advises women with high-risk pregnancies to avoid acupuncture because of the lack of data on possible adverse reactions.

To date, most Western medical professionals know very little about the effects of acupuncture on pregnancy. But there's

evidence that they are beginning to recognize the value of better understanding it.

For instance, The National Institutes of Health (NIH) recently awarded a \$400,000 grant to researchers at Yale University to study acupuncture as a treatment for back pain during pregnancy.

Knowing more about alternative practices such as acupuncture could eventually lead to an integrative approach to managing pregnancy and labor—one that weds modern medicine with complementary techniques. That would mean more options for patients such as Shrader, Rasmuson and countless others.

"I am amazed at how dramatic the results were," Rasmuson says. **BC**