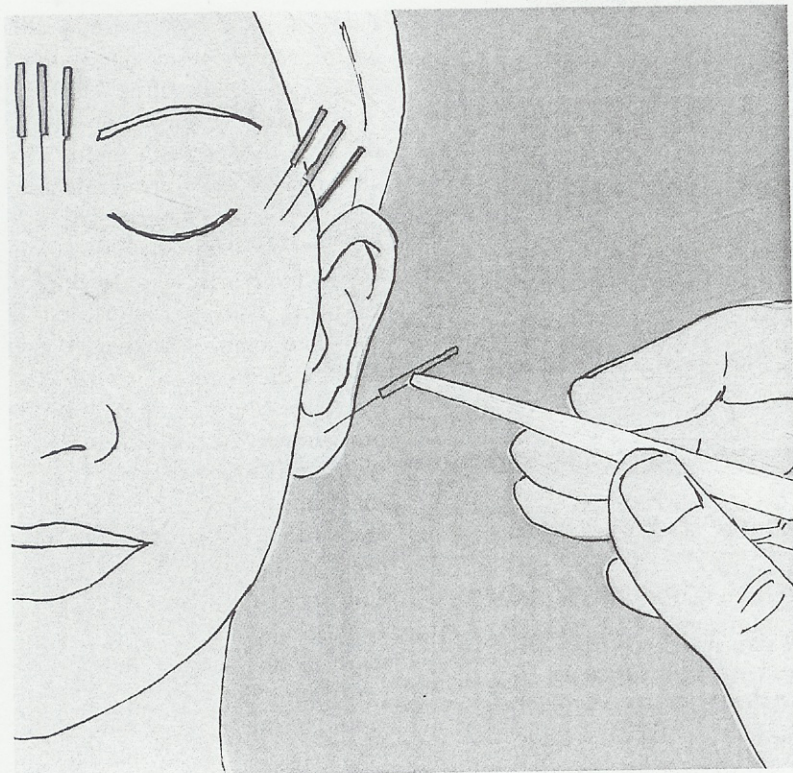


On Pins and Needles

Acupuncture soothed her aching back. So, she figured, why not try it on her aging skin?



WRITTEN BY

Gail Buchalter

ILLUSTRATION BY

Jennifer Downey

I considered plastic surgery and realized my vanity has a price—\$35,000, to be exact, which is the going rate for a top-notch facelift. Also, elective surgery scares me—it's like tempting the fates. Skin peels and laser surgery were a possibility, but I remembered reading about “cosmetic acupuncture” several years ago. This, I felt, would be my youth solution. I just didn't know any practitioners in the area.

I must explain that I am an acupuncture devotee. I haven't found a faulty muscle group or internal organ that hasn't thrived from the precise placement of needles that define the ancient practice. After a car accident, followed by physical therapy and chiropractic care, acupuncture was the only modality that eased the pain of whiplash and released the muscle spasms. Since then I've been treated for hepatitis and lower back pain, all with great results.

So I was more than interested when an acquaintance serendipitously told me that Mike Campbell, an acupuncturist located in Easton, Md.,

THE NIGHTMARE began last year when I told someone I had a twenty-eight-year-old son, and he didn't gasp, “Oh, that's not possible, you don't look old enough.”

Shaken, I made it home and threw on the lights over the bathroom mirror and stared at my reflection. Yeah, I admitted in a moment of unrelenting honesty, I was on my way to becoming a prune. What to do?

had been working on her face. She was delighted with the way her chin had regained some of its original definition, and the creases around her eyes and the furrow between them had all filled in after just six sessions.

When I first call Campbell, I tell him I've been longing for "cosmetic acupuncture."

He quickly corrects my terminology, telling me what he does is Facial Rejuvenation Acupuncture (FRA). "It's much more than a cosmetic procedure," he says. "You are manifesting health from the inside out, so the whole body is benefiting."

This non-surgical method of reducing the signs of aging is based on the principles of traditional Chinese medicine. According to Connecticut-based Virginia Doran, the acupuncturist who developed FRA and trained Campbell last year, many meridians—channels of energy called Qi (pronounced "Chee")—either begin or end on the face. Thus practitioners of FRA know how to specifically affect the face while simultaneously treating the underlying factors that contribute to the aging process, such as diet, sun exposure, and stress. To date, she has trained 1,500 acupuncturists and believes there are as many as 20,000 currently performing facial acupuncture in the nation. Campbell performs several FRA sessions a week, working on thirty-year-olds trying to prevent the ravages of time on up to seventy-year-olds trying to reverse them. The medical community has yet to endorse the treatment, but maybe thousands of newly youthful-looking women (not to mention Gwyneth Paltrow) aren't all wrong.

The recommended course of a dozen treatments should take five to ten years off my face, Campbell says. He also assures me that with proper maintenance and follow-up sessions every month or two, the results should last two to five years. (Facelifts last approximately ten years.) But Campbell warns me this process isn't a quick fix. The results are cumulative.

During our initial consultation,

Campbell, a wiry, compassionate ex-Marine who also teaches Tai Chi, ushers me into his treatment room. Very casual in khakis and a polo shirt, his eyes shine with interest as he asks about my general health and lifestyle, which includes lots of yoga and no meat, sugar, dairy, or caffeine. But decades of sacrificing my face to the sun gods has left my skin dried out and deeply lined.

Campbell takes my six pulses (three on each wrist), which correspond to several organs, such as the lungs, kidneys, heart, liver, and spleen. Then he checks the color, shape, and coating of my tongue to determine my general health. The session—and every session thereafter—begins with Campbell placing the tips of several half-inch needles into the cup of my ear. There's a twinge of discomfort, which instantly dissipates into a sense of well-being. Those needles release a flood of endorphins. Today my pulses are wiry, revealing stagnant Qi, so Campbell places one-inch needles on acupoints on my feet, legs, hands, and wrists to balance and promote free flow of my energy. Some of the needles elicit a startling effect akin to "pins and needles," known as the "Qi sensation."

Campbell works on balancing my Qi, helping my body heal itself. Only then does he begin the work on my face, since it is just one part of the overall treatment. Using specially designed tweezers to hold the 4mm intradermal needles (they're too small for him to manipulate with his fingertips), Campbell places them in the lines, threading them under the skin's surface, along each wrinkle. He places approximately seventy-five needles in the lines around my eyes, across my forehead and bridge of the nose, the upper lip, the cheeks, the chin, and under the eyebrow and jaw line. There is some discomfort, as with any pin prick, but no unbearable pain; many needles I don't feel at all. And, trust me, I am a big baby. I ask for a mirror, but I can barely see the translucent tips of the needles. Of course, my eyesight is also going.

The placement of the needles—which takes nearly an hour—represents a two-prong attack. They create a healing response to the microtrau-

ma caused by the needling, sending anti-inflammatory agents to each area. In addition, collagen is produced and disbursed, helping smooth out the wrinkles.

Campbell follows the needling with micro-stimulation; he uses a machine with finger-like wands, which he rolls under the eyes, neck, and under the chin, sending tiny electric impulses to those areas. It reduces puffiness under the eyes and increases muscle tone. Then he provides a mudpack to reduce the toxins in the skin. The two-hour procedure ends with a short neck massage.

I bolt upright as soon as he finishes and grab the mirror. The change is more dramatic than Campbell has led me to believe. I realize this is the best facial I've ever had. I mention this, and he tells me he has people who come for just one session. The wrinkles have disappeared. My neck and chin have less sag and my eyebrows are resting higher on my forehead.

But by the next day, my laugh lines reassert themselves and my neck is loosening. It was exactly what I was told to expect, so I don't pout. I go back to Campbell for another session later the same week. Again, I leave a mere youth of my former self. And again, the sags and bags return in a couple of days. During my third session a needle leaves a bruise, starting at my hairline and sliding a half-inch down my forehead.

Two sessions later, I have a small bruise on my cheek from another needle. It's annoying, but I'm plucky and vain and can't wait to continue. Besides, Campbell warned that bruising occurs, and, it seems, I bruise very easily. He slows the treatments down. "I couldn't be as aggressive," he says. "I used fewer needles than I ordinarily would have." The bruising stops.

By the sixth session, the changes in my skin begin to last longer between sessions, and we slow down to one session a week. After spending all this time together, Campbell knows the names of all the kids in my cabin at camp, the make of the first car I ever owned, and all my favorite films.

By the seventh treatment, I see that the lines around my eyes and the "marionette" lines (between the nose

and outside edge of the lips) are lighter. He's pleased with the thickening of my skin, which, he explains, is a good thing.


After the twelfth treatment, he expresses his satisfaction. My wrinkles, he says, have diminished, but more obvious is the tightening of my pores and the smoothness of my complexion.

I stop by to show off my new face to my dermatologist, Elizabeth Burke, in Salisbury. She has traveled down Vanity Road with me before, zapping some broken capillaries (also due to too much sun) that flecked my face. "This is not my area of expertise," Burke cautions, "but acupuncture seems to be a sensible [alternative] choice to Botox. The general principle makes sense: There is less muscle mass as you mature, which causes deep wrinkling, so if you stimulate the muscle function, it's reasonable to believe it will help lighten the wrinkles."

She shifts the light so it glares in my direction. "Your skin looks healthier and softer," she adds. "It seems a bit thicker, not as etched and rugged."

I agree. Truthfully, I am not completely satisfied, but that's because I don't look thirty. Once I accept the limitations of reality, I admit I am really pleased with the results. My skin is healthier and is more tightly wrapped around my face. I feel healthy.

Now that I am once again thick-skinned, I am ready for the big test. I am going to a huge party in New York City, where I will see a lot of people I haven't seen for at least a year.

Granted, I have my hair done, put on makeup, and slip into something wonderful, but the response to my new face really surprises me. Dozens of people tell me how great I look. One delightful man asks me if I "had any work done." I confess to the acupuncture process and highly recommend it. Even in the ladies room, with its hideous fluorescent lighting, a couple of women throw some more compliments my way. I'm not going to pass for a grad student, but I don't care. I feel as good as they say I look. 

Gail Buchalter writes from her home in Rhoadsdale, Md. Century Spine Center, 609 Dutchman's Ln., Easton, Md. 410-763-6700. Sessions cost \$150 each.