

Weight off their minds

Thousands of mainlanders are checking into hospitals for acupuncture treatments in their bid to beat the battle of the bulge, writes Joshua Samuel Brown

HAO LIGONG IS smiling, which is strange for a man with 15 needles sticking from his abdomen.

Hao, a 33-year-old bus driver from Hubei province, is a patient at the Cangzhuo branch of the Aimin Weight Reduction Hospital, and in addition to the 15 needles in his belly, there are a dozen others poking out from various points on his legs. Despite looking like a human pin cushion, he has reason to be happy. Just two months ago, Hao weighed 100 kilos. While he's hardly svelte now, he's considerably trimmer at his current weight of 77 kilos. "My goal is to lose another 7 kilos" Hao says "then I'll be about right for a man of my height [176 cm]". Hao is an outpatient at the hospital, and for the past two months, he's visited every other day for intensive 30-minute acupuncture treatments. He pays 960 yuan (HK\$899) a month, which covers the cost of acupuncture, a supply of traditional Chinese medicine and the support of the clinic's doctors and other patients. This is a considerable portion of his salary, but he has no regrets. "I really felt unhealthy before beginning this programme." He says. "That's all changed now."

The Cangzhuo hospital is one of 22 Aimin Weight Reduction Hospitals in China using this method, a mix of traditional and modern techniques designed to help people lose weight, and more importantly, to keep it off. Acupuncture plays a big part of the programme. For the purpose of weight loss, needles are inserted in various points of the ear lobe, a method that has been used to successfully treat various "crave-based maladies" from smoking to drug addiction. Outside the hospital, patients stand chatting with one another, and the small white tissue patches on various points on their earlobes are tell-tale signs that they've just come out of treatment.

But for the extremely obese, eliminating craving is not enough. Internal organs need to be stimulated, both to aid digestion and to facilitate a change on a glandular level. For this, needles are used all over the body, as in the case of Hao. This, combined with Chinese herbal medicine, change in diet and lifestyle, and old-fashioned self-help are helping some to win their battles with the bulge.

Opened in 1992, the first Aimin hospital is in Tianjin, about two hours from Beijing. It's a large facility, with space enough to host 300 live-in patients and serve about three times as many outpatients who have regular treatments. "Our hospital attracts patients from all over China, often the most extreme cases of obesity in the country," says Li Ying, office manager of the flagship hospital. "We have four branches in Asia outside of China, and there are plans to expand into Europe and North America. We also have some Eng-

lish speaking doctors," she says, noting that the hospital has about 100 foreign patients to date.

Li offers some insight into the scope of China's obesity problem. "We don't have exact figures, such as what percentage of Chinese people are obese, or merely overweight. What we do know is that we see more extreme, cases every year. The problem tends to be greater in the north than in the south, and more extreme in the wealthier parts of the country. Many patients are teenagers who come from just about every corner of the country."

About four hours south of Beijing, Cangzhuo is a small city by Chinese standards. Yet since it's opening just 10 months ago, the Cangzhuo facility has treated about 1,100 patients, nearly all from the local area. Dr Sun Huaqing, the chief doctor of the facility feels that the numbers themselves speak volumes.

"Cangzhuo has under a million people, yet we have treated around 1,100 patients in just 10 months."

The problem, according to Sun, has much to do with diet and lifestyle. "Look at what people eat nowadays." She says "Junk loaded with fat and cholesterol. McDonalds, Kentucky Fried Chicken, stuff nobody in China ate 25 years ago." But Dr Sun doesn't just blame western food, conceding that many traditional Chinese snacks are deep fried, loaded with salt, and "just plain unhealthy".

Of course, lifestyle plays a crucial role in obesity." Sun adds "for these reasons, affecting a major change in thinking is a big component of the Aimin method. To conquer obesity, one needs to go through a profound change".

Hearing this, Ren Yueliang nods his head in agreement. At 186 centimetres, Ren is a big man. He weighs 110 kilos, which, combined with his height, gives him the sort of body that an American football coach might look at and think "you, me, and a weight room and we'll have a killer linebacker inside of two months." But few would think of Ren as "grotesquely obese." Airline ticketing agents would cough nervously and call a supervisor over to explain to Ren that he had to buy two seats. Not like they might have done less than a year ago, when he walked into the Cangzhuo clinic and weighed in (on a special scale) at 200 kilos. "We saved the belt that Yueliang was wearing that day," says Sun, holding up a 1.7-meter strip of leather. Ren holds the belt up around his waist like a limp hula-hoop. He is now able to measure his belt size in centimetres - 90 of them - like most other people.

Now an outpatient like Hao, Ren came to the clinic almost nine months before and signed himself in for an intensive two-month in-house programme that included daily acupuncture treatments,



"Getting people to change their lifestyle and appetites that contributed to their weight problem in the first place is difficult"

Dai Ruhai
Aimin Weight Reduction Hospital

diet plans, traditional Chinese medicine and a programme of regular exercise. But it's the final component of the programme that would look most familiar to someone from the self-help happy west: group therapy. "Helping somebody to lose weight is comparatively easy," says Dai Ruhai, manager of the Cangzhuo facility. "Getting people to change their lifestyle and appetites that contributed to their weight problem in the first place is difficult. But keeping them on the right track after the weight's been lost... that's the real challenge. In this, we feel that the moral support of other patients is invaluable."



Ren Yueliang (centre) is shown his original girth by Dai Ruhai (left) and Dr Sun. When Ren arrived at the centre he weighed in at a whopping 200 kilos (above left)

Dai understands the problem of obesity on more than a professional level. For one thing, he's Sun's husband. For another, he's not merely the manager of an Aimin hospital - he's also a former patient. "Do you see that?" He asks, pointing to a photograph of a flabby man with the beginnings of man-breasts sitting by a swimming pool. "It's the only picture I allowed to be taken when I was fat."

Dai is no longer the fat man with sausage thighs threatening to burst his lycra swimsuit. Indeed, he's trim, and healthy looking enough to act as spokesman for good living in general. For this he thanks both the Aimin programme and his wife.

"He was fat when I married him," says Dr Sun. "At the time, I was still studying TCM [traditional Chinese medicine] and acupuncture as a method to weight-loss, and I could see the handsome man inside begging to be let out."

Dai agrees with his wife. "Inside of every patient we see is a healthy person trapped inside of an obese body. Coming for treatment is the first step towards their release."

The Tianjin Aimin Weight Reduction Hospital is at You Yi rd, 34, Tianjin, China, Telephone # 022 8837 9666, Fax 022-2837 1192. Their website (in Chinese only) is at <http://www.aimin.cn>.

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Follow your heart: Live Your Passion Weekend Event (Oct 10-12) is about discovering your life direction and heartfelt passion. Tel: 8203 3260 for more information.

Yoga awakenings: Swami Vidyanand, head of the Sriyoga Centre, has recently moved to Hong Kong from the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in New Delhi, India where he taught the Sriyoga method. He is leading a series of classes on awakening Yogic states. This Friday is a 2-hour workshop: Awakening of Yogic Prana. Next week: Awakening of Yogic Minds (October 17) and on October 24: Awakening of Yogic Psychic Being. 6-8pm. Sriyoga, 3/F, Winning Centre, 46-48 Wyndham St, Central. Tel: 2810 9768. E-mail: sriyoga@sriyoga.net

Yoga birthdays: Yogasana is celebrating its first anniversary with a Yoga Mala on Friday from 5.30pm. All benefits go to the charity ORBIS. Reservations necessary. Yogasana 3/F, Century Court, 239 Jaffe Rd, Wanchai. Tel: 2511 8892 or e-mail: bookings@yogasana.com.hk

Peter Lloyd is the editor of www.holistichongkong.com

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