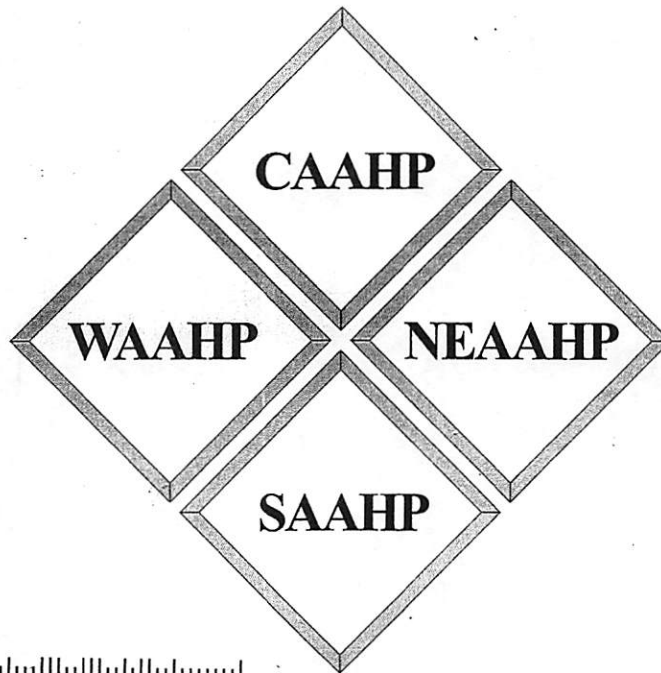


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■ Career Pathways to Acupuncture Research

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A recent Cochrane review examining the effect of acupuncture on migraines, by Linde et al. (2016), identified 22 trials with 4985 participants, and found that acupuncture can reduce the frequency of headaches, is better than sham acupuncture, and may be as effective as using headache medication. The review, updated from 2009, provides large-scale evidence of the positive effects of acupuncture on migraines (Linde et al., 2016). Unfortunately, many other areas of acupuncture research have not yet been assessed with such scale, success, or research integrity. Moreover, although theories abound on how acupuncture influences the body—from neuromodulation, to pain-gating theories, to communication through the body's fascia—experts have not yet reached a conclusion on exactly how it works.

This is precisely where today's acupuncture researchers can truly have an impact on the field. Organizations such as the Society for Acupuncture Research (SAR) are key players in advancing acupuncture research around the globe while keeping its members informed about new discoveries.

SAR is the longest existing research society for all Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) disciplines," says Dr. Richard

Hammerschlag, Oregon College of Oriental Medicine's Dean Emeritus of Research, and co-founder of the Consciousness and Healing Initiative, "It's a bridge between the biomedical and CAM research communities" (R. Hammerschlag, personal interview, July 15, 2016).

SAR is an organization that works to further the state of acupuncture research around the world, connecting established acupuncture researchers with each other as well as with practicing acupuncturists and scientists who are interested in becoming involved in acupuncture research. The organization's website, <http://acupunctureresearch.org>, provides members of SAR, acupuncture stakeholders, and the public with evidence-based assessments of acupuncture research on pertinent topics, keeps members updated with the latest research summaries, and provides a variety of evidence-based outcome measures and research tools, including discussions of sham and placebo measures and research trial design. SAR's next biennial conference, coming up on April 27-29, 2017 in San Francisco, will offer lectures on basic, clinical, and translational research in acupuncture.

Says Hammerschlag, "Pre-conference workshops allow new people coming into the field to get up

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to speed on what the issues are in acupuncture research. It's easy for a new person to get plugged in and meet the more experienced people. You can sit at a table and have dinner with an expert and pick their brain."

So how does one get into acupuncture research? The best way is to have a Ph.D. in a scientific research field, such as physiology or neuroscience, says Hammerschlag. Typically, completing a Ph.D. or a combination of a DAOM and an M.P.H. could give you the background in clinical and human subject research to apply as a principal investigator for a research grant, many of which are available through the National Institutes of Health's National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health (NCCIH). Clinical trials are only one type of acupuncture research that NCCIH funds—basic science research can also help further explore how acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine affect the body.

However, as noted by Dr. Rick Harris, a SAR Board Member and Associate Professor in the Department of Anesthesiology at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, the role of principal investigator is not the only one available to those interested in research. "Acupuncturists need to be involved in research too," says Harris, "in choosing and designing a point formula, helping with grant writing or study design, or providing patients for the trial." Harris also suggests that others can contribute to acupuncture research, including statisticians or research assistants with any science or acupuncture background (R. Harris, personal interview, July 12, 2016).

Hammerschlag agrees that acupuncturists are a key part of a research trial collaboration, particularly when it comes to fine-tuning a study design and applying traditional Chinese medical theories to a research question. "I tell acupuncture practitioners to push me and get me to think outside the research box," he says. "With acupuncture it's usually not ideal to have a 'one size fits all' protocol. I want patients in research trials to get the treatments they need and want to be as flexible as possible with point protocols. Acupuncture research should reflect real-world acupuncture practice as much as possible."

For a college student, Ph.D., or acupuncturist interested in research, there are plenty of roles available in ongoing studies. Students or graduates can contact local researchers and ask about positions in ongoing studies. Harris says, "Look up what grants NCCIH has funded and see what projects are going on. Then email someone whose work is exciting and ask if you can work with them. Or, if you have a Ph.D. in a field you're excited about, see how it can be applied to acupuncture research."

Acupuncture research is important because it can enhance the credibility of acupuncture as medicine. Research can identify what conditions acupuncture treats well and what conditions are better left to other forms of health care. Moreover, basic science research can show how acupuncture affects the body, and what pathways or neurological centers become activated or inactivated with treatment. But just as much as large-scale trials are needed, case reports and case series by solo practitioners can also help build and expand the evidence base.

Hammerschlag says, "We are in the 21st century, and we want to test anything that may be clinically helpful in health and healing. Acupuncturists are needed in medical centers and hospitals to provide integrative care and support to patients. The more we can strengthen the evidence base, the more the medicine will become mainstream."

Harris agrees, "If you read a study where a hundred or a thousand patients received acupuncture and got better, you're more likely to try it. Ultimately, we want to make patients better. And acupuncturists want to help patients."

For those interested in acupuncture research as a career field, there are many ways to get involved. Attending a SAR meeting is an excellent way to learn about acupuncture research around the world, and becoming a member of SAR gives new researchers access to evidence-based assessments and research tools. An acupuncture school could develop a research department or choose to focus part of a DAOM program on school clinic-based research, including chart reviews, EMRs, and how to retain patients until the conclusion of a course of treatments. A Ph.D. could join a university research department with an interest in pain or stress management, and apply for grants where acupuncture is used as a treatment methodology.

"There's so much more to understand about the human body," says Hammerschlag, "Acupuncture is a major treatment methodology that can tell us about physiological self-regulation in ways that drugs and surgery won't allow us to understand."

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