

# Some radiological observations on the practice of insertion of 'charm needles'

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## Material

A NOT UNCOMMON PRACTICE in Malaysia is the insertion of "charm needles" into soft tissue in various parts of the body. These are easily demonstrated radiologically, but may cause difficulty in interpretation to those unaware of the procedure.

Fourteen cases were discovered in the Department of Radiology, University Hospital, Malaya, in the course of routine reporting over a period of 18 months. A further 2 cases have been added to this small series from the Radiology Department of the District Hospital, Alor Star. There were 13 women and 3 men in the series. The patients included representatives of the three major groups in the country, Malay, Chinese and Indian. In our series, cases were drawn from all social grades, from wealthy housewives to labourers.

A number were questioned as to why they had the needles inserted. The most common belief was that the needles made the patient more radiant and attractive to the opposite sex — hence the term "charm". Some believed the procedure to have a medicinal or curative effect for certain diseases. A few considered that it conferred exceptional physical strength.

## For "Charm" and "Beautification" Purposes

The favourite sites of insertion are the subcutaneous tissues of the cheeks and mons pubis (Fig. 1). There is no particular pattern of needle arrangement and they usually lie at random in the subcutaneous fat and fascial planes, though the distribution of the needles is usually median and/or



Fig. 1

Shows numerous needles embedded in the pubic region.



Fig. 2

Illustrates the symmetrical distribution of the implanted needles in each breast.

symmetrical. A good example is the patient in Fig. 2 in whom 15 needles have been embedded into each breast. Fig. 3 shows the frontal view of the chest of a patient who was being treated in the hospital medical clinic for mitral stenosis.

The needle has been implanted in the subcutaneous tissues over the dorsal spine in order to enhance his physical attraction.

#### For "Medicinal" Purposes

The belief is widely held that the needles can relieve headache, aches and pains in joints or in the back or abdomen. The patient in Fig. 4 attended the Ear, Nose and Throat clinic because of nasal discharge and headache. The occipito-frontal view of the paranasal sinuses showed evidence of frontal sinusitis. According to the patient, the single needle had been implanted in his forehead to relieve his headache but had not proved very effective.

Complications are rarely encountered. The patient in Fig. 1 developed haematuria soon after the needles were inserted. This was probably coincidental, though it is possible that one of the needles had penetrated the urethra or bladder. This was never proven for the patient failed to return

for further investigation. A potential danger would seem to be the possibility of a needle migrating into a vein to lodge finally in some vital organ.

#### Discussion

A common error is to misinterpret the relatively thick charm needles as acupuncture needles. The needles used for "charm" and "medicinal" purposes are usually gramophone needles, and this was confirmed by one of the authors who visited the local medicine man, popularly known as the "bomoh". Needles used in acupuncture are longer and finer and acupuncturists do not leave the needles in the subcutaneous tissues except by accident should one fracture.

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Fig. 3

A single needle in the subcutaneous area of the back (arrow), an incidental finding in a patient with mitral stenosis. Note left atrial enlargement.

#### Abstract

In Malaysia, it is not uncommon practice among "medicine men" to insert metallic needles into the subcutaneous tissues of the body. Radiological appearances are illustrated. The reasons for this



Fig. 4

Single metallic needle seen overlying the frontal sinuses.

practice amongst the West Malaysians are briefly discussed.

#### Reference

1. Gimlette, J. D. (1929): Malay Poisons, Charms and Cures, 3rd Edition, Churchill, London.