



Dosage: An Acupuncturist's Art Form

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Abstract

This article discusses the art of dosage, or number of needles used, within a single acupuncture treatment. It explores the author's clinical experience in refining 'just the right amount' for any one patient. Over-treating or under-treating are significant in that each miss the mark and fail to optimally adjust the *qi*. Guidelines for assessing 'just the right amount' are posited and discussed: *Treat at Threshold*, *Discern Norm*, *Remember Law of Least Action*. These guidelines arise from the author's learning history in treatment observations with JR Worsley; the *Law of Least Action* as taught by Worsley and implied in the *Su Wen*; and concepts from Korean Acupuncture as taught by Peter Eckman.

Keywords: Acupuncture, dosage, treat at threshold, discern norm

Dosage is a major conversation topic among herbalists but rarely one among acupuncturists. Dosage is defined as frequency of treatment visits as well as the number of needles used per treatment. While this article focuses on dosage within an individual treatment, i.e., number of needles used, the same principles may apply in terms of treatment frequency.

When studying acupuncture with JR Worsley in England in the late 1970s, his teaching included '*The Law of Least Action*,' a principle found in homeopathy. Worsley often spoke of homeopathy in high regard as the only other natural medicine that applied the Laws of Nature in its application. He therefore included this principle in his teaching and applied it to his acupuncture treatments. The Law defined the most efficacious treatment as the one that achieved the desired outcome with the fewest needles.

The *Law of Least Action* can find a Chinese medicine parallel in the concept of a *Su Wen* treatment. According to Andrew Prescott, "*Su Wen* Ch.5 about *wu-wei* ('non-action') seems pretty clear; 'non-action' is surely doing only what is necessary without excess force ('*wu-shi*' 'non-striving'). That sounds like 'law of least action' to me."¹

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In my clinical experience I have found that the number of needles used can make the difference between a treatment that heals and one that creates an aggravation or even sets the person back. In short, the Goldilocks principle of just the right amount, not too much or too little, applies. But how does one know what that is?

For years, Worsley's treatments have continued to inform me. He had an unusual ability to design an elegant treatment that met the person where they were—an amazing knack for judging this right amount. Sometimes his treatments were minimal and sometimes they applied many bilateral points. Are there principles that can guide practitioners in determining dosage?

In assessing the optimum dosage for any one patient there are three guiding principles that I teach to acupuncture students in designing their treatments: *Treat at Threshold*, *Discern Norm*, *Remember Law of Least Action*.

What is Threshold?

Threshold is “the point at which a stimulus is of sufficient intensity to begin to produce an effect.”² Not just any effect, but an effect in acupuncture that is in ‘just right’ relationship between energy (*yang*) and matter (*yin*). Matter in our body is the structure: cells, organs, bones, fascia, etc. that give form to our body. Energy is the vibratory aspect or *qi* that gives movement to our body and flows within and through our form. This ‘just right’ or working relationship between energy and structure is the threshold the treatment needs to reach.

This dynamic interaction for each person is unique, and the clinician must find the proper calibration for that unique person. It is that sweet place where the form is receiving energy or *qi* so the *qi* can be absorbed or conducted by the form. This principle has implications for sensing effective dosage.

In any acupuncture treatment the dosage can be at the patient's threshold, which is optimal, or it can be too much (overdose) or too little (underdose). Both miss the mark of effective treatment. One can over-dose or under-dose. In either case the treatment is not as effective as it could be.

- In overdose, the number of needles and points chosen is greater than what the patient's norm or structure can conduct efficiently. There will necessarily

then be an aggravation on any level of body, mind or spirit. What seemed like a good idea turns out not to be so. Treatment itself gets in the way or locks things up. One has to be particularly aware of this possibility when treating elderly because the structure or *yin* aspect of an elderly person is waning. The organs, tissues, etc. diminish in their functional capacity and are therefore less able to conduct *qi*. In this case *yang* is overriding *yin*.

- In underdose, the number of needles or points chosen do not meet the threshold of *qi* required to produce an effect on the structure or form. In this case *yang* is under-riding *yin*. This manifests characteristically with a robust, solid, dense structure and weak *qi* pulse; or often when the Spirit is inert and must be enlivened for a change to register and the points chosen do not give that result; or in a patient with very strong or excess *qi* who needs to be met with an equally strong force—as in the number of needles and points chosen. In any of these examples, the patient is left not feeling touched or engaged by the treatment.

Worsley always reached for this threshold. He never left a treatment until he saw a desired effect—and if he didn't get it, he went back to the drawing board of his assessment tools. What will give a rise to this person? What will settle this person? And how is that translated into an effective treatment?

What is Norm?

Worsley taught the concept of ‘Norm’ as a criterion to guide ongoing treatment. This was defined as a pulse picture with all 12 Officials registering the same quantity in volume. Very little else was offered in the early days as most patients coming for consultation were not close to Norm, and I did not have the privilege of seeing patients with him over the long term.

It was therefore music to my ears when Peter Eckman described a concept from Korean Constitutional Acupuncture in the 1990s and now in his 2014 book, *The Compleat Acupuncturist. Essentially*, “... all the Organs and their Meridians are not equally strong in a state of health, but display a pattern characteristic of that individual.”³ This became for me a description of Norm as it applies both to intensity as well as to the unique arrangement of Officials for that

individual. In my experience treating through the lens of Five Elements and Causative Factor, once the CF Official is treated appropriately all Officials register a harmonious quality as well as a pattern of arrangement of the Officials characteristic for that individual.

It became part of my practice to discern this understanding of Norm by noting when my patient reported feeling well and flourishing. Special note of their pulses was taken. If there was balance and harmony among the Officials that matched their report, I would take note of the quantity and relative balance among Officials as likely their norm. This became an imprint in my mind as to their norm and referred to in subsequent treatments. For example, in treating an excess Wood presentation, the wiry quality relaxes on all 12 Officials and the quantity on Wood reduces from +2 to +1.

Clinical evaluation then focuses on the intensity of the pulse characteristic for that individual, i.e., at what volume is reduction sufficient to produce health. Similarly in a deficient Water presentation, the deep quality rises from -2 to -1 and all Officials rise or settle evenly, with the Water in third position remaining slightly less in volume.

Norm is important especially if one sees the same patients repeatedly over time. The principle is the same as in watering plants. The right amount of water creates a strong and healthy plant but too much makes the plant soggy, so it may rot.

If treatment pushes a patient beyond their norm, they may not feel very well and may therefore suffer an aggravation. This effect has occurred in my clinic more than once. A patient I was treating reported feeling well, but when more treatment was applied she lost that sense of wellness. For example, in treating an Earth constitution, several points on Spleen and Stomach began to bring this patient from lethargy to aliveness, but with the addition of Stomach 8 she fell back into a tired state. She herself said to me, "There seems to be an optimum number of needles for me and when I go past that, it isn't so good." I knew she was correctly expressing the principle of overtreatment beyond her norm. That subtle balance of her unique *yin* to *yang* had been momentarily lost.

Law of Least Action Revisited

Worsley referred to this principle because it made sense to him, but the Law of Least Action is significant to remember in treatment dosage for another reason. *Qi* is more akin to the laws of physics than to the biomedical model. In physics one of the classic laws is known as the Law of Least Action. In essence, "Nature takes the shortest, most efficient route to accomplish things."⁴ If we apply this to our acupuncture treatments, more

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needles than necessary can add complications to the smooth flow of *qi* and muddy the effect.

Also, in a self-regulating and self-healing system it is important to know what wellness is and when no treatment is the best one—an application of the Law of Least Action. In a culture where many patients are constantly striving for better, it is significant to let them know that how they are right now is just right. If it is on the mark, that in itself is a powerfully effective treatment. If we can sense a normative pulse and assess the patient's reporting, we might actually be able to discern this moment.

Conclusion

My guiding criteria are sensory inputs rather than scientific ones. The effect of *qi* intervention towards 'just the right amount' defies mechanistic indicators. The latter may be able to measure changes in quantities of *qi* but not what is optimum for any one person. To discern the latter requires the development of sensory observational skills that palpate or sense change in pulses, the patient's demeanor, working signs and symptoms, and the change in the room that occurs when the *qi* meets its threshold.

In the moment of the treatment the clinician calibrates through their senses how sensitive or reactive the patient is to the intervention. It is in this subtle domain of *qi* that lies the most reliable indicators of a treatment's effect.

Dosage is an art form. These guidelines can help a practitioner effect what is known in the classics as a *Su Wen* treatment: one needle that is in perfect alignment with the needs of the patient. The great physician Hua To was admired for his ability to treat patients effectively using only one or two needles. Like Hua To and like Worsley, shouldn't we all strive for the highest in our art form?

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