Top 3 Facts You REALLY Need to Know about Dry Needling

1. Dry needling is acupuncture.

Originating in ancient China, acupuncture is a surgical operation [1–4] in which an acupuncture point (a specific muscle or connective tissue site) is punctured with an acupuncture needle (a fine needle of up to six inches in length) to cure, mitigate, treat, or prevent disease or other conditions [1]. Acupuncture is based on anatomy, physiology, and pathology [1,5–13].

Dry needling is acupuncture in which an acupuncture point that has become reactive (exquisitely tender to palpation), commonly known in the West as a trigger point, is punctured with an acupuncture needle to cure, mitigate, treat, or prevent disease or other conditions, especially musculoskeletal and connective tissue disorders, including musculoskeletal pain [1].

Dry needling is not new. It was described in the first century BCE in the Yellow Emperor’s Inner Classic (traditional Chinese: 黃帝內經; pinyin: Huáng Dì nèi jīng), the foundational text of Chinese medicine [1].

2. Dry needling is unsafe when performed by unqualified practitioners of acupuncture, such as physical therapists.

As exposed by the case reports below, dry needling is unsafe when performed by unqualified practitioners of acupuncture, such as physical therapists.

California

Case 1. In January 2014, 31-year-old general manager Jamie Del Fierro suffered a penetrating left lung injury caused by a chiropractor performing dry needling [14]. The penetrating left lung injury resulted in a traumatic pneumothorax (an accumulation of air in the pleural cavity resulting from blunt or penetrating chest injury and causing lung collapse) [14]. She was treated for the traumatic pneumothorax at the emergency department of the Kaiser Permanente Zion Medical Center in San Diego, California [14]. The traumatic pneumothorax required medical and surgical intervention [14].

Colorado

Case 1. In November 2013, 17-year-old professional freeskier Torin Yater-Wallace suffered a penetrating right
lung injury caused by a physical therapist performing dry needling [15–17]. The penetrating right lung injury resulted in a traumatic pneumothorax [15–17]. He was treated for the traumatic pneumothorax at the emergency department of the St. Anthony Summit Medical Center in Frisco, Colorado, and was admitted to that hospital on the same day. The traumatic pneumothorax required medical and surgical intervention [15]. He was hospitalized for five days [15].

**Case 2.** In April 2015, 36-year-old senior recruiter Amanda Hilton suffered a penetrating left lung injury caused by a physical therapist performing dry needling [18]. The penetrating left lung injury resulted in a traumatic pneumothorax [18]. She was treated for the traumatic pneumothorax at the emergency department of the Good Samaritan Medical Center in Lafayette, Colorado, and was admitted to that hospital on the same day [18]. The traumatic pneumothorax required medical and surgical intervention [18]. She was hospitalized for three days [18].

**Case 3.** In June 2015, 41-year-old clinical social worker Lisa Kerscher suffered a penetrating lung injury caused by a physical therapist performing dry needling [19]. The penetrating lung injury resulted in a traumatic pneumothorax [19]. She was treated for the traumatic pneumothorax at the emergency department of the Rose Medical Center in Denver, Colorado [19]. The traumatic pneumothorax required medical intervention [19].

**Georgia**

**Case 1.** In August 2015, 70-year-old Eva Campbell suffered a penetrating left lung injury caused by a physical therapist performing dry needling [20]. The penetrating left lung injury resulted in a traumatic pneumothorax [20]. She was treated for the traumatic pneumothorax at the emergency department of the Northeast Georgia Medical Center Gainesville in Gainesville, Georgia, and was admitted to that hospital on the same day [20]. The traumatic pneumothorax required medical and surgical intervention [20]. She was hospitalized for four days [20]. However, she now has difficulty breathing [20].

**North Carolina**

**Case 1.** In December 2014, a female patient suffered a penetrating lung injury caused by a physical therapist performing dry needling [22]. The penetrating lung injury resulted in a traumatic pneumothorax [22]. The traumatic pneumothorax required medical and surgical intervention [22].

**Case 2.** In February 2016, a female patient suffered a penetrating cervical spinal cord injury caused by a physical therapist performing dry needling [22]. The penetrating cervical spinal cord injury resulted in severe pain, numbness, and paraparesis (partial paralysis of the lower limbs) [22]. She was treated for the severe pain, numbness, and paraparesis at the emergency department of the WakeMed Cary Hospital in Cary, North Carolina, and was admitted to that hospital on the same day [22]. The severe pain, numbness, and paraparesis required medical intervention [22]. She was hospitalized for three days [22].

**Ohio**

**Case 1.** In January 2016, 51-year-old Brenda Bierman suffered a penetrating right lung injury caused by a physical therapist performing dry needling [23]. The penetrating right lung injury resulted in a traumatic pneumothorax [23]. She was treated for the traumatic pneumothorax at the emergency department of the ProMedica Toledo Hospital in Toledo, Ohio, and was admitted to that hospital on the same day [23]. The traumatic pneumothorax required medical intervention [23].

**Case 2.** In February 2016, 47-year-old Anong Pipatjarasgit suffered a penetrating thoracic spinal cord injury caused by a physical therapist performing dry needling [24]. The penetrating thoracic spinal cord injury resulted in a traumatic spinal epidural hematoma (an accumulation of blood in the spinal epidural space resulting from blunt or penetrating spinal injury) [24].

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was treated for the traumatic spinal epidural hematoma at the emergency department of the ProMedica Toledo Hospital in Toledo, Ohio, and was admitted to that hospital on the same day [24]. The traumatic spinal epidural hematoma required medical and surgical intervention [24]. After recovering from emergency surgical decompression and evacuation of the traumatic spinal epidural hematoma, she underwent extensive inpatient and outpatient rehabilitation [24]. However, she now has permanent severe neurologic deficits, including paraparesis, sensory deficits, and bowel dysfunction, and has persistent severe back pain [24].

South Carolina

Case 1. In September 2014, a patient suffered a penetrating lung injury caused by a physical therapist performing dry needling [25]. The penetrating lung injury resulted in a traumatic pneumothorax [25]. The traumatic pneumothorax required medical intervention [25].

Virginia

Case 1. In December 2013, a 50-year-old female patient suffered a penetrating right lung injury caused by a physical therapist performing dry needling [26]. The penetrating right lung injury resulted in a traumatic pneumothorax [26]. The traumatic pneumothorax required medical intervention [26]. She was hospitalized for two days [26].

Case 2. In May 2015, a 30-year-old female patient suffered a penetrating right lung injury caused by a chiropractor performing dry needling [27]. The penetrating right lung injury resulted in a traumatic pneumothorax [27]. The traumatic pneumothorax required medical intervention [27].

Case 3. In Fall 2016, 23-year-old physical therapy student Wes Jenkins suffered a penetrating lung injury caused by a physical therapist performing dry needling [28]. The penetrating lung injury resulted in a traumatic pneumothorax [28]. The traumatic pneumothorax required medical and surgical intervention [28]. He was hospitalized for four days [28].

To report a serious adverse event caused by an unqualified practitioner of acupuncture, such as a physical therapist, performing dry needling, use the Dry Needling Adverse Event Reporting System (DNAERS) form at https://www.acupuncture-safety.org/dry-needling-adverse-event-reporting-system-dnaers-form. The National Center for Acupuncture Safety and Integrity (NCASI) will use the information as part of our legislative and administrative advocacy work.

3. It is a violation of Federal law when unqualified practitioners of acupuncture, such as physical therapists, purchase, possess, or use an acupuncture needle.

An acupuncture needle is a restricted medical device under section 520(e) of the Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act (the FD&C Act) (21 U.S.C. § 360j(e)) [29].

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has restricted the sale, distribution, and use of an acupuncture needle “to prescription use” [30]. In addition, in order to ensure the safe and effective use of an acupuncture needle, FDA has further restricted the sale, distribution, and use of an acupuncture needle “to qualified practitioners of acupuncture as determined by the States” [31]. Therefore, it is a violation of Federal law when unqualified practitioners of acupuncture, such as physical therapists, purchase, possess, or use an acupuncture needle [32].

References

1. Yellow Emperor’s inner classic (traditional Chinese: 黃帝內經; pinyin: Huáng Dì nèi jīng). (China); compiled in the first century BCE.
6. Zhu J. Drawings of Ou Xi Fan’s five viscera (traditional Chinese: 歐希范五臟圖; pinyin: Ōu Xī Fàn wǔ zàng tú). (China); 1041-1048.
7. Yang J. Drawings for preserving the truth (traditional Chinese: 存真圖; pinyin: Cún zhēn tú). (China); 1102-1106.

29. See 21 U.S.C. § 360j(e); 21 CFR § 807.3(i); 21 CFR § 880.5580(b)(1); 21 CFR § 801.109; see also 61 Fed.Reg. 64616 (Dec. 6, 1996).

30. See 61 Fed.Reg. 64616 (Dec. 6, 1996); see also 21 CFR § 880.5580(b)(1); 21 CFR § 801.109; 21 U.S.C. § 360j(e); 21 CFR § 807.3(i).


32. See 21 U.S.C. §§ 331(a)-(c), (g), and (k); 21 U.S.C. §§ 352(q) and (r).

The National Center for Acupuncture Safety and Integrity (NCASI) is an all-volunteer 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization that works to protect patients from unqualified practitioners of acupuncture, such as physical therapists. We accomplish our mission through legislative and administrative advocacy.

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