



Gisela Norman

Interview by Fiona McClymont

Gisela Norman is a registered nurse and practising acupuncturist, with post-graduate training in Chinese herbal remedies, Qigong and gynaecology. She is also a Reiki Master. She recently spent two weeks in Gaza, working in collaboration with World Medicine: a non-political, non-religious charity which provides complementary health care to people around the world suffering the effects of trauma, disaster and poverty.



What's the best thing about living in the South West?

I live in Chippenham now, although I lived in Bristol for years before that. I moved to the West from London, so I really appreciate the manageable size of Bristol and I love the proximity to the countryside.

How did you become interested in acupuncture?

I trained in mental health and worked as ward sister in psychiatry at The Royal Free Hospital and later worked a lot with the homeless sector. I saw with my work that while Western medicine is excellent, it has its limitations. I always had a sense that the way we treat people medically wasn't quite right. A friend of mine mentioned they were having acupuncture for their bad back and told me to come with her and have a look. My reaction to it was immediate and very powerful: I just felt a big "Yes!" and knew straight away that it was what I wanted to do. I was very drawn to the way it incorporated the body, mind and spirit. It looked at why people get ill, the preventative side as well as how to treat them. So I trained and have been practising acupuncture for the last 23 years.

What inspires you?

Seeing the most fantastic changes in the people I treat. They often come to me when they've tried other things and really want to move forward in their life and I continue to be amazed by the results. "You've really changed my life!" is something I hear a lot and I feel very lucky to be able to work with that and to witness it.

What does acupuncture offer people?

Acupuncture is dynamic. It's all about facilitating change. It looks at your whole life, all aspects of your health and also touches the spirit. It's about working with the energy and essence we all have within us. That essence can become severely depleted and my work is about getting a person's body and mind strong, enabling their spirit to come back to life again. That change is the magic of it and that's what keeps me going.

What's your favourite book?

There's a lovely book called Life Lessons (How Our Mortality Can Teach Us About Life and Living) by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, along with a chap called David Kessler. She is a psychologist, working with people before they die, counselling them and helping them with that transition. The book is about her experiences with that process and describes how those who are dying can teach us so much about how to live. It is written in a very gentle, straightforward and inspiring way.

What's your greatest achievement?

Clinically I've had some fantastic achievements, such as treating people with fertility issues. Right now I have ten patients who are at different stages of their pregnancies, which is just fantastic. I'm also proud of the fact I'm a very active member on the Prince of Wales Foundation for Integrated Health, a working group that has developed some extremely important guidelines for the NHS, commissioners, managers and also people who work in complementary medicine. The guidelines are evidence-based and show that Chinese medicine is cost effective and gives amazing results. It will hopefully mark a real shift in attitude and get things moving in regards to getting acupuncture incorporated into mainstream NHS care.

Why did you go to Gaza with World Medicine?

I felt inspired by an article about a previous project of acupuncturists working in the West Bank with World Medicine. Personally, I'm at a point in my life where I feel I can really give something back. My son's just left home and gone to university, I'm comparatively young, fit, in good health and I have a strong sense of wanting to make things happen and wanting to move out of my comfort zone. In addition, I really feel we can do some good over there. Acupuncture is fantastic for shock, trauma, anxiety, depression, grief, and bereavement: all the effects of post-traumatic stress syndrome, which is sadly very common in Gaza. So many people have lost members of their families, there's a lot of emotional trauma. There are also a lot of muscular-skeletal problems, gastrointestinal problems, because their diet is atrocious and the water and electricity supplies keep getting cut off. The basic health of civilians there is extremely poor.

Were you nervous?

Well, I went into a war-zone, so I had a healthy sense of nervousness, which was needed because it kept you on your toes. My family are supportive and were obviously concerned, but I had great trust in the medical team we were with over there and we were very well received and looked after.

How did the patients in Gaza respond to acupuncture?

It was an amazing experience. The responses to treatment really touched my heart and were fantastic. We saw literally hundreds of patients. Word had got round that we were there and at times there were scuffles on the door and near-riots with people desperate to get in and be treated. We had patients queuing up from

4am to get seen; we had to open up a cupboard so we could use that as a treatment room because the demand was just so huge. We were bringing Chinese Medicine into a community that was unfamiliar with it, but they really embraced it - the medical need is so great there and the doctors and nurses out there see that acupuncture is something that can help and that works. There were no lengthy discussions, we were just giving very practical things for them to do and they said, "Let's go for it!" That positive energy and attitude was just wonderful.

What is the longer-term plan?

This trip was not just a one-off. We don't want to act as a sticking-plaster to the very real problems over there. Instead World Medicine are working at setting up something more long-term with health centres and NGOs in Gaza. We taught the medical teams there how to practise ear acupuncture so they can carry on doing it after we leave. They are very excited about that and are going to start using the techniques we taught them straight away because it's especially good for post-traumatic stress. We are going back, no question, and hope to set up a clinic specifically for children, because we treated so many of them out there. A team is going back to Gaza in January 2010 and I plan to go out there in August. World Medicine want more practitioners to get involved, not just acupuncturists, and I'm going to be doing another major fund-raise. I urge people to donate: the need is so great and the results are so amazing.

What has life taught you?

That the power of mind is vastly underestimated and that we all need to realise how precious that power is and how to nourish and nurture it. In Chinese medicine there are four basic aspects of life that we need to look after: one is diet and nutrition, two is rest and relaxation, three is exercise and movement and the fourth is mental clarity, which is possibly the most profound. It's so important to constantly be learning new things and pushing yourself out of your comfort zone. Life should ideally be about doing things that feed the essence within you. I learnt a lot about myself in Gaza and I haven't stopped buzzing since I got back.

www.gisela-norman.co.uk tel 07968 855 001 Gisela holds acupuncture clinics at Kingswood Natural Health Clinic, Bristol (www.kingswoodnaturalhealth.co.uk), Park Lane Practice, Chippenham (www.osteopathsinchippenham.co.uk), The Complete Health Centre, Cirencester (www.thecompletehealthcentre.com). www.worldmedicine.org.uk
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