Viewpoint: Acupuncture pseudoscience — Debunking Washington Post’s tiresome promotion of ‘legalized quackery’

Recently the Washington Post ran a column under the headline, “Does acupuncture work for chronic pain? Here’s what the science says.” (The column first appeared back in July, but the Post’s website promoted it again just last week.)

Before giving you the Post’s answer, let me give you the correct answer. No! Not “maybe” or “sometimes” or “we’re not sure.”

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First it puts forward the logically flawed (and non-scientific) claim that hey, the U.S. Medicare system now covers acupuncture for back pain, so it must be effective.

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I wish it were true that Medicare was purely science-driven, but both the federal and state government have been lobbied for years by acupuncturists (and other purveyors of dubious therapies) to provide public tax dollars to cover their practices.

For a deeper dive into these lobbying efforts, I recommend the lengthy takedown by Jann Bellamy explaining that acupuncture is “legalized quackery.”

The Post article then goes on to discuss the science, for which it relies primarily on a single study, a meta-analysis published in 2019 by [Biostatistician and attending research methodologist at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center] Andrew Vickers.

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Vickers has published multiple meta-analyses, and if he’s shown anything, it’s how easy it is to cherry-pick from the (extensive) acupuncture literature and find studies that prove whatever point you want to make.