

## **Acupuncturists Help Homeless Vets "Stand Down" Safely**

By Mitchell Lehman, MTOM, LAc

Stand down is a military term, originally used to describe what soldiers did when leaving a castle's walls: standing down in safety with their heads down. Putting down arms and letting someone else be on patrol. This came to mean any ceasing of combat behind the lines. With the increase in deployment during both the Viet Nam War and Gulf Wars, there was often not time for soldiers to stand down and unwind. The nervous system ends up in revolt. It was with this in mind that Stand Down was created as a safe haven for homeless veterans to regroup themselves and rest for a bit. It is estimated that as many as 33 percent of homeless people are veterans.

For the Stand Down event itself, which took place July 17-19, 2009, we create a military-like camp on the San Diego High School athletic field. It is a safe place for veterans to get sober. It has a fence and security to keep the residents safe from the outside world, since homeless people are rarely safe. This is an opportunity to sleep with both eyes closed. The event lasts three days, and food and shelter are provided. Essential services are made available, including medical, dental and optometry, VA and Social Security benefits, Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous meetings, clothing, hair cuts, possible placement in residential facilities, social services, chaplain services and integrative medicine.



Acupuncture began at Stand Down with an invitation in 2001. I was asked if, as a veteran, I wanted to help other vets. I had only 15 hours to give, so I made the most of the time. When I showed up there was half of a canvas tent and 22 chairs. The other half of the tent was used by Healing Touch practitioners. They had nice soft music while we vets were on the rowdy side.

I began treating people in chairs, focusing on their chief complaint (mostly pain). Needle the first 22 patients in a row, then began the next round once the first 22 were finished. This went on for the shortest 15 hours I had ever experienced. Little did I know the Healing Touch people were keeping records for me, as my intake was verbal.

I mostly used small slice of a variation on the Balance Method because it was more convenient to use arms and legs, and I had little space and no tables. However, it worked quickly. I used 30-gauge needles, at up to two inches insertion. Veterans carry their wounds deep, so the needles have to follow to get to that deep pain. It was easy to reassess, since the patients could move the injured areas. Our focus at Stand Down is on treating physical pain. It is also more measurable than emotional or mental pain.

Patients returned the next day. Some came in all three days. Three days and 15 hours of acupuncture produced 375 satisfied patients. Since this was a very taxing pace, I decided that we needed help the following year. The next year, I asked Pacific College of Oriental Medicine if they were interested in participating in Stand Down. I was sent some acupuncture interns and some massage therapists.

This year we gave more than 1,000 treatments in 20 clinical hours. We now have 3,600 square feet of treatment area (the largest tent at Stand Down). In addition, a separate waiting area outside gives us more

space. We are still enormously crowded. We had 16 massage tables, two chiropractic adjusting tables and 30 treatment chairs for acupuncture. Pacific College was the first school to join the movement, but other schools have provided massage therapists. We have professionals as well as students doing the treatments. About 40 to 60 volunteers make up Integrative Medicine. The entire Stand Down event has about 2,000 volunteers.

Integrative Medicine is out at the very end point of the Stand Down venue, kind of out in the weeds near the baseball field. The veterans who come out there usually hear about massage and stay for other services. Returnees from other years remember us. I hear when I ride the trolley or am out shopping: "You're the acupuncture guy. You helped me."

Veterans Village of San Diego-VVSD, a residential rehabilitation facility for homeless veterans with drug and alcohol dependencies, sponsors the Stand Down event. The program deals with all facets of reintegrating veterans back into society. Integrative Medicine came to Veterans Village eight years ago. I view Veterans Village as Stand Down the other 362 days of the year. There, we continue with the same work

In our one-year study at VVSD, we found that by almost exclusively treating physical pain, we also relieved emotional pain (anger, worry, anxiety). Sometimes, taking care of the physical pain is what is called for. It seems we can get to the emotional through the physical. Maybe we can get to both without having to focus on one fix. Instead, if we can fix the body, the mind follows. For more information on how to help, please visit [www.vvsd.net](http://www.vvsd.net).

---

**Mitchell Lehman** runs a small practice in San Diego, Calif. He serves as Integrative Medicine Director for both Stand Down and Veterans Village of San Diego. He can be contacted at: [mitch.instructor@sbcglobal.net](mailto:mitch.instructor@sbcglobal.net) or (619) 857-3703.



Page printed from:

[http://www.acupuncturetoday.com/mpacms/at/article.php?id=32072&no\\_paginate=true&no\\_b=true](http://www.acupuncturetoday.com/mpacms/at/article.php?id=32072&no_paginate=true&no_b=true)