

# Chinese medicine practitioner is passionate about his role in CTCA's family of cancer treatment centers

## THAT YIN YANG THING

Darin Bunch has his nose to thank for his choice of career.

Were it not for the repeated sinus infections he suffered as a child and teenager, he might never have sought the help of an acupuncturist and developed an interest in Chinese medicine.

And, he might never have asked that acupuncturist how someone goes about studying Eastern medicine and heard the answer that ultimately spurred him more. Bunch, who doesn't believe in the word "can't", was dismissed for being non-Asian and told to "go do something else."

He actually did pursue something else, earning a Bachelor's degree in psychology from Seattle University. But more well-meaning advice, this time from one of his professors, steered him away from psychiatry and back to his original quest.

"You know," said the professor, "you really talk too much. Your patients wouldn't have a chance."

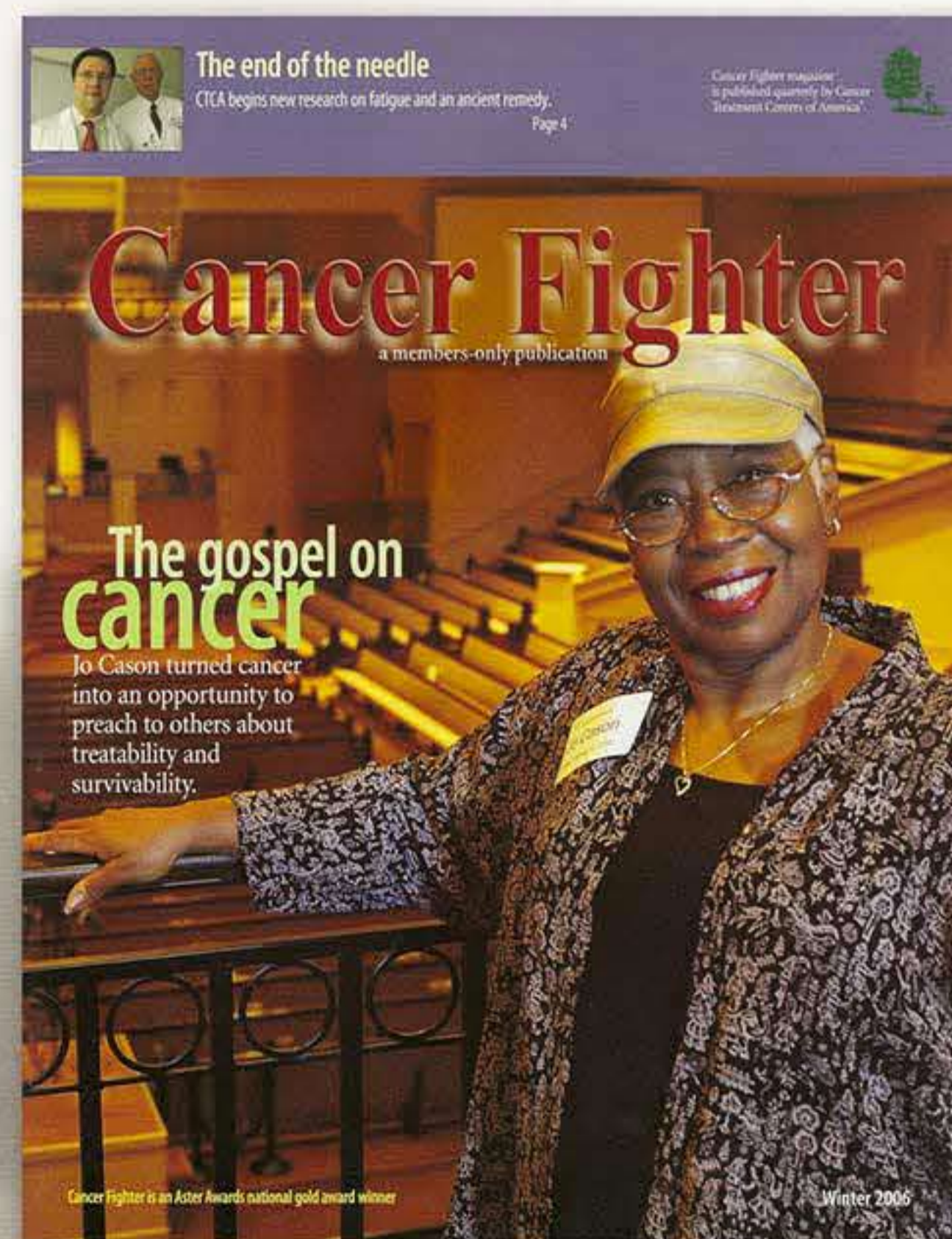
"I knew he was right," says the gregarious Bunch, who has been practicing Chinese medicine and acupuncture for the past three and a half years at Seattle Cancer Treatment and Wellness Center, an affiliate of Cancer Treatment Centers of America.

"I realized my true passion was alternative medicine," which he quickly points out is only considered "alternative" in the West. Chinese herbal medicine easily dates back 5,000 years, acupuncture about 3,500 years, he notes.

Many a patient has become a believer under Bunch's care.

Anna Herrman went to see him after a nurse suggested acupuncture to relieve the pain that followed surgical removal of the cancer in her breast and lymph nodes.

Before acupuncture, she could barely raise her right arm. Two hours after her first treatment, she was nearly pain-free and could lift that arm as high as the other. Having two good arms comes in handy when you live on a farm in rural Eastern Washington.



"If somebody else were telling me this story, I'm not so sure I would believe them," says Herrman. "I am so thankful."

Bunch, who no longer suffers sinus infections, attended the renowned Northwest Institute of Acupuncture & Oriental Medicine, where he earned the degree of Master of Traditional Chinese Medicine. That's equivalent to dual master's degrees in acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine.

The 36-year-old Northwest native feels blessed to be working at a Seattle clinic that integrates East and West. When the center opened in 1996, it was the first cancer care center in the region to have medical oncologists working side by side with naturopaths, Chinese medical practitioners and a mind-body social worker.

Since then, more and more traditional medical providers and facilities have started offering referrals to complementary care practitioners because their patients are demanding it.

At Seattle Cancer Treatment and Wellness Center, where everything is under one roof, patients need only walk a few feet down the hall from their oncologist's office to Bunch's. The integrated care team works together to ensure that each patient receives the best possible approaches to fighting their disease, boosting their immune system and minimizing side effects.

Bunch's busy schedule speaks to the growing acceptance and popularity of Chinese medicine in the Northwest as well as across the country. Within his first year and half at the center, he went from working two days a week to five and now sees an average of eight to 12 patients a day.

"Cancer is such a complicated disease that you have to work from many different levels," he says. "You can't just attack it one way."

The marriage of Eastern and Western medicines in cancer care is a little like the pairing of opposites yin and yang, he explains. Together they create a dynamic balance.

Oncology, which includes chemotherapy and radiation, is the yang.

"Like the dragon, it has to go in and fire away at everything," Bunch says.

It's still the best way to attack a tumor, but it's not very discriminating. Healthy cells are killed too.

Acupuncture – which involves the insertion of sterile, hair-thin, stainless steel needles into points on the body – is the calming yin.

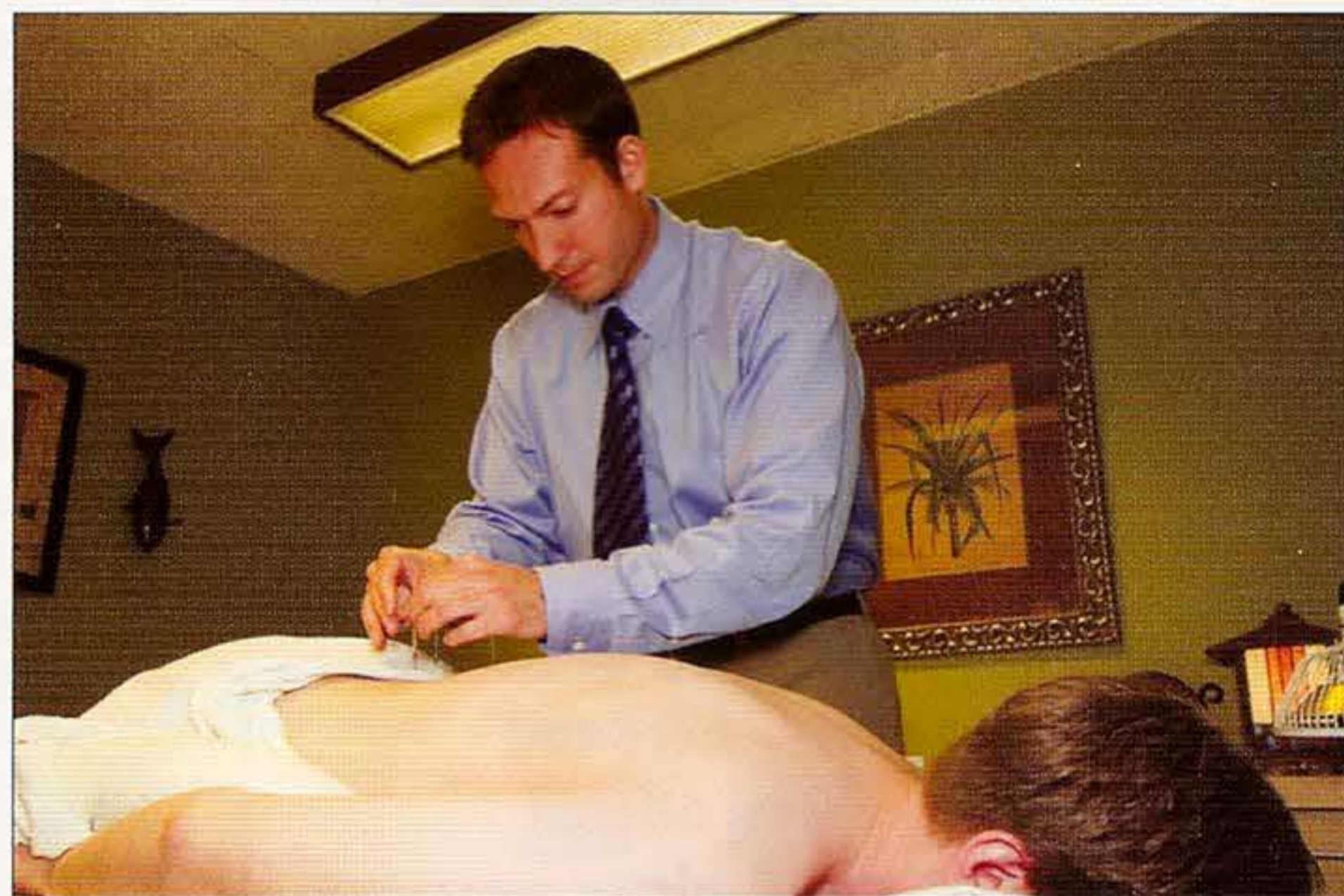
The body has as many as 2,000 acupuncture points, which are connected by 20 energy-conducting pathways, or meridians. Acupuncture is believed to help with the normal flow of this energy, or qi (pronounced "chi"), thus keeping the body in balance.

In the language of Western medicine, acupuncture is believed to stimulate the nervous system and/or cause the release of pain-relieving substances, including endorphins.

In cancer patients, it has been shown to ease the side effects of chemotherapy, including nausea and pain, while helping the drugs circulate through the body. Patients not only get improved results from their chemo, but they're more likely to tolerate and complete their course of treatment.

Chinese medicine also enhances the body's natural immunity, giving it a better fighting chance against the cancer, explains Bunch, who also prescribes customized herbal formulas for patients. The herbs go deeper than the acupuncture, he says, working on and supporting the blood.

**"Cancer is such a complicated disease that you have to work from many different levels. You can't just attack it one way."**



Darin Bunch gives a CTCA patient the ancient Chinese treatment as he employs thin acupuncture needles. The body has as many as 2,000 acupuncture points and the treatment is believed to help with the normal flow of energy in the body and the release of pain-relieving endorphins.—Photos by Mike Moore

While acupuncture and herbs get most of the attention, the sum of Chinese medicine is much more than those parts. It includes proper diet, sleep, massage and heat therapies, and exercise, says Bunch who has also studied meditation as well as the healing movements and postures of Tai Ji and Qigong.

While he's passionate about his profession, he readily admits Western methods are much better at meeting some medical needs.

"If you go skiing and break your leg, please check into a hospital," he says. "Acupuncture isn't emergency medicine, typically."

It is, however, an excellent choice for chronic ailments including depression, fatigue, sleep disorders, arthritis and pain-related conditions, and, of course, the management of cancer.

Bunch lost his grandmother to cancer in 1997, and her memory influences the way he interacts with

his patients.

He treats them the way he would want his grandmother to be treated, as a whole person with a life that extends beyond the disease and the clinic's walls.

"I may be teaching them about Chinese medicine," he says, "but my patients teach me every day. It's this dialogue that is the most rewarding thing I can imagine."

Patients need to be allowed and encouraged to play an active role in their care, he stresses.

Indeed, Seattle Cancer Treatment and Wellness Center prides itself on its patient-centered approach. Patients direct their own treatment after consulting with the clinic's oncologists and integrated care practitioners in meetings that have been known to last three hours.

The underlying assumption is that no discipline or person has all the answers.

"If, after trying it, they say acupuncture is not for me, that's okay," Bunch says.

Truth is, very few patients drop off Bunch's schedule. Some, including Herrman, continue to see him for "tune-ups" after they've completed their cancer therapies.

"I can't say how much of this is due to any one thing," says Herrman, who also took Chinese herbs and followed a naturopathic regimen. "I just know that my energy level is good and whatever I'm doing is working."

Bunch is modest when patients thank him for giving them back their quality of life.

"I'm just the strategist, the mediator," he says. "Really, they should be thanking themselves because it's their own bodies taking away the pain."

One patient summed it up well. Bunch will forever remember the card she gave him in gratitude.

"Thank you so much for your healing needles," it said.—by Pam McGaffin