

Editorial

Battlefield Acupuncture: Remembering a Pioneer and a Friend—*In Memory of Dr. Richard C. Niemtow, MD PhD MPH (1942–2025)*

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Abstract

This contribution honours the life and legacy of Dr. Richard C. Niemtow (1942–2025), the founder of Battlefield Acupuncture (BFA) – a method that combines military medicine and traditional Eastern healing principles. Developed in the early 2000s for rapid, drug-free pain relief, BFA has since gained international recognition for its effectiveness and simplicity. The author reflects on the scientific collaboration with Dr. Niemtow, which included advanced neurophysiological studies demonstrating BFA’s impact on pain, stress, and autonomic function. The editorial offers a personal and professional tribute, highlighting Niemtow’s role as a visionary physician, dedicated mentor, and compassionate human being. His enduring influence continues to shape integrative pain medicine worldwide.



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Keywords

Battlefield acupuncture; Richard C. Niemtzw; integrative medicine; auricular acupuncture; pain management; neurophysiology; fNIRS; complementary medicine; military medicine; opioid alternative

“He wanted to relieve pain—not someday, but immediately.” — Gerhard Litscher on Richard Niemtzw

1. Introduction

In February 2025, the international medical acupuncture community lost one of its most remarkable persons: Dr. Richard C. Niemtzw – physician, retired military Air Force colonel, visionary, and the spiritual father of Battlefield Acupuncture (BFA) [1, 2]. His medical philosophy combined pragmatism with compassion, military medicine with Eastern healing arts. This editorial reflects on our shared scientific journey and pays tribute to his exceptional legacy.

2. The Birth of a Method from Practical Experience

Richard Niemtzw developed Battlefield Acupuncture in the early 2000s during his service as a flight surgeon in the United States Air Force. His goal was to provide rapid and reliable pain relief under extreme conditions – even without medication. By placing small semi-permanent needles in five precisely defined points on the ear, many patients experienced immediate pain relief.

The method impressed through its simplicity: it could be performed in less than five minutes, required no electricity, no sterile environment – just trained hands and medical empathy.

3. A Scientific Partnership

Our paths first crossed at an international acupuncture congress in Germany in Göttingen. I was fascinated by Battlefield Acupuncture – it was innovative, effective, and yet under-researched. We decided together to investigate its effects using advanced technology. In my hometown, Graz, we analyzed BFA using modern methods such as [3]:

- *Functional near-infrared spectroscopy (fNIRS)* to measure cerebral blood flow and oxygen metabolism (Figure 1)
- *Thermography* to observe surface skin temperature changes
- *Laser Doppler flowmetry and imaging* for microcirculation analysis
- *EEG and HRV* to monitor cortical bioelectrical activity and heart rate variability

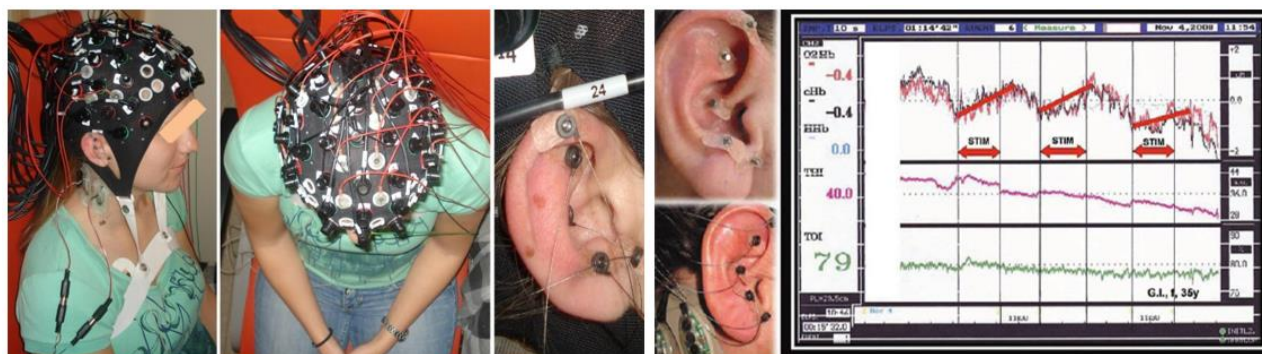


Figure 1 The author performed research using advanced high-tech methods from anesthesia and intensive care medicine at the Medical University of Graz and the Technical University of Graz to explore the effects of Battlefield Acupuncture. Several articles were published in collaboration with Richard C. Niemtow, the founder of the BFA method [3, 4] (photos © G. Litscher).

These studies demonstrated that BFA produces significant, reproducible neurophysiological effects, not only on pain, but also on stress processing and autonomic regulation [2-4].

4. International Impact and Recognition

Our joint publications and his training sessions in the U.S., in Europe, and Asia helped make BFA known beyond its military origins. Today, it is increasingly used in emergency departments, pain management, and palliative care. The method provides a promising response to the challenges of the opioid crisis, without the associated risks.

Richard was not only the founder of the method – he remained a teacher, mentor, and visionary. Wherever we presented, he had the gift of inspiring others. Richard said *“There are people who still doubt this and I think they always will – but for us who are in the clinic every day, we see people suffering from the war and from this or that and there’s nothing left to offer them. And we can put 50-cent needles in an individual’s ear, and they look at you and smile and say, ‘my God, I feel better!’”* [5].

5. Personal Reflections

Richard Niemtow was a man full of contrasts – a military doctor with Eastern wisdom, a hands-on clinician with high scientific standards, a decorated veteran with profound humanity. Our conversations rarely focused solely on data [1-4, 6-8] – they revolved around ethics, responsibility, and the broader question of how to make modern medicine more humane.

His dry humor, curiosity, and tireless commitment will be sorely missed.

Scientifically, we did not always agree about publishing articles, and that's exactly what I appreciated about Richard. He always expressed his opinions clearly. Yet despite all our differences, we always found a compromise based on mutual respect. Just as I valued him deeply, he valued me too – his wife, Songxuan Zhou Niemtow MD (China) LAc, told me so after his passing. Richard always helped me whenever I needed it. That kind of collegiality is rare – and invaluable (Figure 2).

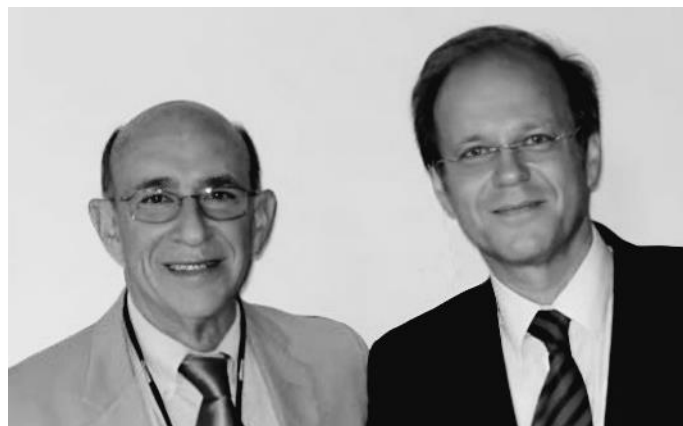


Figure 2 Richard C. Niemtzw, MD, PhD, MPH (1942–2025), pioneer and originator of Battlefield Acupuncture; with Gerhard Litscher, contributor to its scientific development (© G. Litscher).

6. A Lasting Legacy

Battlefield Acupuncture today symbolizes interdisciplinary, integrative auricular pain medicine. Its history shows what is possible when bold ideas meet scientific precision – and when people work together with mutual curiosity and respect.

May his name live on not only in textbooks, but in every treatment where BFA spares someone pain.

7. Short Biography – Richard C. Niemtzw, MD, PhD, MPH

- Born: 1942, Philadelphia, PA.
- Education: Medical studies in the U.S., board-certified in oncology, radiotherapy, and acupuncture.
- Military Career: Air Force colonel and Medical Director of the U.S. Air Force Acupuncture Clinic.
- Achievements: Founder of Battlefield Acupuncture; advisor to the U.S. Department of Defense on complementary medicine, President and Editor-in-Chief of the American Academy of Medical Acupuncture's (AAMA) flagship journal, *Medical Acupuncture*.
- Died: February 2025, at the age of 83.

Author Contributions

The author did all the research work for this study.

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Competing Interests

The author hereby declares that no conflict of interests exists in connection with the publication of this editorial.

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