OBJECTIVE: To investigate characteristics and outcomes of patients undergoing acupuncture treatment for osteoarthritic pain under conditions of routine care in the framework of statutory health insurance in Germany. METHODS: Patients with chronic pain due to osteoarthritis (ICD-10 diagnoses M15 to M19) treated with acupuncture as the leading form of therapy were included in an observational study. Detailed questionnaires including instruments to measure pain intensity (numerical rating scales from 0 to 10), disability (Pain Disability Index) and quality of life (SF-36) were filled in before treatment, after treatment and at 6 months. Patients suffering from osteoarthritis of the knee and hip also filled in the Western Ontario and McMaster Universities (WOMAC) Osteoarthritis Index questionnaire.

RESULTS: A total of 736 patients were included in the main analysis. Seventy (10%) patients and 278 (38%) patients, respectively, suffered exclusively from primary osteoarthritis of the hip or knee, 239 (33%) from another type of osteoarthritis and 149 (20%) had more than one affected joint. On average, patients received 8.7 +/- 3.1 acupuncture treatments. Statistically significant and clinically relevant improvements were seen in all subgroups both after treatment and at 6 months in all major outcome measures. In patients with osteoarthritis of the hip, the WOMAC sum score was 47.9 +/- 20.7 at baseline, 34.8 +/- 20.0 after treatment and 33.1 +/- 22.2 at 6 months. The
respective values in patients with osteoarthritis of the knee were 51.7 +/- 20.9, 34.1 +/- 23.3 and 34.6 +/- 25.1. CONCLUSIONS: In this study, patients with chronic pain due to osteoarthritis reported clinically relevant improvements after acupuncture treatment. Due to the uncontrolled design and the high proportion of patients lost to follow-up, the study findings must be interpreted cautiously.