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Acupuncture: Regulation & Coverage in Canada

Acupuncture is one of the treatment modalities of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), the oldest professional, continuously practiced medicine in the world. It uses very slender needles inserted into specific points in the body in order to relieve pain, improve function, and speed healing. The World Health Organization has listed several gastrointestinal issues as being effectively treated by acupuncture, including acute and chronic gastritis, constipation, diarrhea, paralytic ileus, acute and chronic colitis, gastric hyperacidity, chronic duodenal ulcer (pain relief), and hiccough (hiccup).

In April 2008, acupuncture treatments became included for the first time in Canada by the province of British Columbia's Medical Services Plan (MSP) for those who are covered under premium assistance. This includes patients who are eligible BC residents who have a combined family income of \$28,000 or less. Patients have coverage for \$23 per visit per calendar year for a maximum combination of 10 sessions from registered acupuncturists, physiotherapists, naturopaths, chiropractors, registered massage therapists, and non-surgical podiatrists. Only those receiving acupuncture from practitioners registered by the College of Traditional Chinese Medicine Practitioners and Acupuncturists of British Columbia (CTCMA) are covered.

Previous Health Minister, the Honourable George Abbott, said, "Acupuncture treatment is one way of preventing illness and managing existing health conditions. We are making it easier for patients to access a treatment option that they might otherwise be unable to afford."

For those who do not have MSP coverage in BC, and for those in other provinces, many extended health insurance plans also cover some amount of acupuncture treatment but, because each plan is different, patients should check with their insurance provider.

British Columbia

BC is one of only three Canadian provinces that officially regulate acupuncturists. In 1996, the province of BC established the CTCMA as the official professional licensing authority. The CTCMA is a self-regulatory body that operates under the auspices of the provincial government and the Health Professions Act.

The title of "acupuncturist" is protected in BC and all acupuncturists must have received specific educational training (at least 1,900 hours), supervised clinical experience (more than 450 hours), and mandatory acupuncture safety training. In addition, they must pass licensing examinations (both written and practical), complete at least 25 hours of board approved continuing education courses every two years, and have at least 200 patient visits during a consecutive 24-month period.

There are three regulated titles of registration for acupuncturists, listed in order of increasing requirements, each with its own set of licensing examinations: R.Ac. (Registered Acupuncturist) R.TCM.P (Registered Traditional Chinese Medicine Practitioner) Dr.TCM (Registered Doctor of Traditional Chinese Medicine)

BC is the only province that also regulates Traditional Chinese Medicine herbalism and allows the "Dr." title for those practicing TCM. For further information, go to www.ctcma.bc.ca.

Alberta

Alberta also regulates acupuncture with registrants needing to complete an approved program of studies and pass the licensing examination. Acupuncturists must be registered by the Acupuncture Health Disciplines Committee, through Alberta Health and Wellness, the provincial Health Ministry, under Alberta's *Health Disciplines Act*. For license renewal, registrants have to provide evidence that they practiced acupuncture for at least 500 hours in the previous two years.

The title for registered acupuncturists in Alberta is R.Ac. For further information, contact the Acupuncture Committee, Alberta Health and Wellness General Inquiries or Concerns: 780-415-0486 for Doreen Reid, Registrar or 780-427-1419 for Sandra Mann.

Quebec

Quebec is the third province that currently regulates acupuncture. Since 1985, the self-regulating body, *Ordre des Acupuncteurs du Quebec*, has been protecting the public with regard to acupuncture and has regulated the title of acupuncturist. Registrants must attain their diploma in acupuncture or an equivalent and pass the licensing examination.

For more information, contact the *Ordre des Acupuncteurs du Quebec*: 514-523-2882 or 1-800-474-5914, www.ordredesacupuncteurs.qc.ca (French only).

Other Provinces

There is no regulation for acupuncture in any of the other Canadian provinces at this time, although Ontario is currently working toward this, having established a new College of

Traditional Chinese Medicine Practitioners and Acupuncturists of Ontario (CTCMPAO) in 2006. They have recently passed legislation for acupuncture and will soon have the regulations in place. Newfoundland and Labrador expects legislation to come in before the end of the year.

Some regulated health care practitioners are allowed to include acupuncture as part of their practice, including medical doctors, dentists, physiotherapists (except in Quebec, where they are restricted to 'dry needling'), chiropractors (except in BC and Quebec), registered nurses (except in Quebec), and naturopathic doctors.

Melissa Carr, B.Sc, Dr. TCM

Active TCM, www.activetcm.com, 604-783-2846

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