

International News

Acupuncture in New Zealand

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The New Zealand Register of Acupuncturists (NZRA) celebrated thirty years of being an incorporated society at the recent AGM and Conference, which were held in Wellington at the beautiful Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa. The road through these thirty years has not always been a smooth one but it would appear we are entering a new era in which acupuncture as a profession is increasingly being recognised as holding a very important role in the provision of health care for all New Zealanders.

ACCIDENT COMPENSATION

Over recent years, NZRA has put a great deal of effort into building a close relationship with the Accident Compensation Corporation (ACC) – a Government-funded organisation that recognises acupuncture as a valid method of treatment for any New Zealander who has had an accident of any description. Along with osteopaths, chiropractors and physiotherapists, acupuncturists are able to treat injured New Zealanders and be paid by the Government for providing the service. Last year saw the launch of the ACC Treatment Profiles for acupuncture. Representing nearly eight years of work, this document covers every conceivable injury, with full description, possible complications and outline of the treatment protocol, together with the recommended number of treatments expected to resolve the injury. By the time the document was published, many

of the ACC staff were referring to Qi and Blood stasis with relative ease and a much more relaxed relationship existed between the two organisations. This relationship is continuing to strengthen. As well as sponsoring the recent NZRA AGM and Conference, ACC provided a team of advisers who attended the whole weekend conference, providing information and support to all our members with regard to ACC matters or concerns.

STATUTORY REGULATION

Statutory regulation has been another issue that has been all-consuming in recent years. In New Zealand we have the Health Practitioners Competency Assurance Act, which covers all registered health practitioners.

Doctors, physiotherapists, midwives, osteopaths and chiropractors are already covered under this Act and after endless meetings, discussions, disagreements and reconciliations, the various acupuncture groups throughout the country finally agreed that it was in the best interests of the profession to present a united front and apply to the Ministry of Health for similar recognition. Once again there were many hurdles to jump, but fortunately we were able to work through the process and the application was submitted to the Ministry late in 2006.

NZRA was notified in early August this year that the Minister of Health 'has approved acupuncture as an additional profession for inclusion in the scope of

the Health Practitioners Competency Assurance Act 2003'. This is groundbreaking news for all members of NZRA. The full process of statutory regulation is likely to take many months, but acupuncture will now be recognised as part of primary health care in New Zealand.

INTEGRATED HEALTHCARE PLAN

The Minister of Health here in New Zealand, Peter Hodgson, recently announced an initiative which will see practitioners of complementary and conventional medicine working more closely together to provide the best possible health care for all New Zealanders. The initiative is aimed at offering more treatment options for patients by combining the best of what conventional and complementary medicine can offer. Funds have been allocated to explore and assess the advantages and concerns of integrating the medical models and to determine the best methods of integration. The New Zealand Register of Acupuncturists welcomes this initiative and looks forward to working closely with those appointed by the Government to ensure a positive outcome. As acupuncture, osteopathy and chiropractic are already recognised by ACC, there is a firm base on which to build.

With a recent nation-wide survey finding that the majority of New Zealanders had visited a natural health practitioner

within the previous twelve-month period, it is clear that integrated medical care is the path to follow.

ACUPUNCTURE RESEARCH

A very important development to come from the recent NZRA conference was the introduction of a new acupuncture research group. Dr David St George, a Kiwi who has recently returned home from the United Kingdom, gave a very inspiring presentation on the importance of developing research programs that work for us as acupuncturists. Dr St George has a strong interest in complementary and alternative health and was a member, then Chair, of the British Acupuncture Accreditation Board for several years. He was also involved in the setting up of the Bachelor of Science in Traditional Chinese Medicine at Middlesex University. We are very pleased to accept Dr St George's offer to guide us in the right direction with regard to research projects, and we have already had an overwhelming response from members of our organisation who wish to be involved.

EDUCATION

In the past anyone who wanted to study acupuncture and Chinese medicine had to travel overseas to gain a qualification. We also have great numbers of practitioners who completed their education in their home countries and then moved here to New Zealand. Fortunately, for those wanting to study today, there are options closer to home. There are two main colleges of acupuncture and Chinese medicine in New Zealand: the New Zealand School of Acupuncture and TCM, which has campuses in both Wellington and Auckland; and the New Zealand College of Chinese Medicine, with campuses in Auckland and Christchurch. At the moment both Colleges offer the National Diploma of Acupuncture, but both are working to upgrade the qualifications to Bachelor level. By working closely with tertiary institutions in Australia, the Colleges are also ensuring that once the new qualifications are approved by the Tertiary Education Commission, there will again be parity with qualifications offered on both sides of the Tasman.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that acupuncture and Chinese medicine are entering a new age of acceptance here in New Zealand. Whilst those of us who studied twenty or thirty years ago were thought to be somewhat 'out there', the students coming through the Colleges today are entering a world where acupuncture is increasingly accepted as mainstream medicine. More and more members of the public are coming to realise that acupuncture and Chinese medicine really is a complete healthcare package and are insisting that treatment is readily available. The ACC has been greatly influential in this regard. Although the first reason for a visit to an acupuncturist may be to recover from a lower back injury or a sprained ankle, patients quickly appreciate that there is so much more to it and are soon returning for treatment of more complex conditions. They also recommend it to friends and family and increasing numbers are beginning to see their practitioner of Chinese medicine as their primary health carer. It is an exciting time to be an acupuncturist in New Zealand.