

The Role of Acupuncture in California's Health Care System

**January 24, 2006
1:30 p.m.
State Capitol, Room 4202**

Acupuncture has been used for centuries. According to the National Institutes of Health's (NIH) National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, acupuncture originated in China more than 2,000 years ago and is considered one of the oldest and most commonly used medical procedures in the world. In the past two decades, acupuncture's popularity has grown in the United States. According to the 2002 National Health Interview Survey, the largest and most comprehensive survey of complementary and alternative medicine, an estimated 8.2 million adults have used acupuncture.

The term acupuncture describes a family of procedures involving stimulation of anatomical points on the body by a variety of techniques. It commonly involves the use of needles, which are metallic, solid and hair-thin, but other methods, such as heat or finger-pressure, are also used. Experiences vary among individuals, but most feel minimal or no pain. In 1996, the United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved acupuncture needles for use by licensed practitioners. The FDA requirements stipulate that the needles must be sterile, nontoxic, and labeled for single use by qualified practitioners only.

According to the World Health Organization, many conditions can be treated successfully by acupuncture, including respiratory and bronchopulmonary diseases, gastrointestinal, orthopedic, and neurologic disorders. The NIH's Consensus Statement on Acupuncture states that acupuncture is also effective in treating addiction, stroke rehabilitation, headache, menstrual cramps, tennis elbow, fibromyalgia, myofascial pain, osteoarthritis, low-back pain, carpal tunnel syndrome and asthma.

Acupuncture and Asian medicine are one of the newest primary health care professions in California. The California Medical Board first regulated the practice of acupuncture in 1972 as part of acupuncture research in medical schools. In 1976, acupuncturists were licensed but were allowed to treat patients only upon referral by a doctor, dentist, podiatrist or chiropractor. In 1979, California became the first state in the nation to license qualified acupuncturists as primary health care professionals, eliminating the referral requirement. According to the California Board of Acupuncture, currently there are 9,400 licensed acupuncturists and 16 acupuncture

schools in the state.

Although acupuncture is new to California's health care system, many public and private payers reimburse it as a service. Acupuncture is a covered benefit under Medi-Cal with certain limitations and in any case no more than twice per month. Health plans, except for Health Maintenance Organizations (HMOs), and insurers are required to offer coverage for acupuncture to group purchasers, such as employers, except for groups of public employees, but groups are not required to purchase the coverage. According to the California Employer Health Benefits Survey, as of 2004, 53% of covered workers have acupuncture as a benefit; 38% of covered workers in an HMO and 73% of covered workers in a Preferred Provider Organization. In addition, acupuncture is a covered benefit under the California Worker's Compensation system, subject to medical necessity. In 2005, Rep. Hinchey of New York reintroduced H.R. 818 or the Federal Acupuncture Coverage Act. If H.R. 818 passes, it would expand the coverage of acupuncture to millions of federal employees and Medicare recipients.

The purpose of this hearing is to give a brief overview of acupuncture in California and outline the health benefits associated with acupuncture. The hearing also includes a discussion on licensing requirements and the role of acupuncture in California's overall health care system.