



Academic Debate

Discussion about the training or education for “dry needling practice”

论干针的培训与教育

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ABSTRACT

Dry needling is one style of acupuncture, therefore, practitioners of dry needling should abide by laws of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and acupuncture boards in the U.S.. Along with following the laws of practice should be included basic acupuncture education requirements. The education or training requirements regarding regulations for practicing acupuncture among different professionals in the U.S. were investigated for this article. The facts are, in the U.S., licensed acupuncturists are required to attain a minimal of 1 905 educational or training hours via an accredited (such as the Accreditation Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine, ACAOM) school or program before they apply for a license. The physician or medical acupuncturists are required to get a minimum of 300 educational hours in a board (American Board of Medical Acupuncture, ABMA) approved acupuncture training institution and have 500 cases of clinical acupuncture treatments to get certified in medical acupuncture. Some physical therapists (PTs) receive only 20–30 hours of acupuncture training in the form of dry needling in weekend continuing education classes and want to be able to practice acupuncture. For the sake of public safety, they should get a formal education in an accredited acupuncture school or program.

KEY WORDS: acupuncture; dry needling; physical therapy; legal scope; education

In the past decade, dry needling has become a hot debate topic, not only in the academic field^[1-2] but also in the legal field as well^[3-5]. Scholars, such as Zhou, et al^[1], Dascanio^[2], Peng, et al^[6-7], and organizations, such as the American Academy of Medical Acupuncture (AAMA)^[3] and the Council of Colleges of Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine (CCAOM)^[4], have compared the detailed characteristics and multiple aspects of dry needling with acupuncture, coming to the conclusion that dry needling is indeed a style of acupuncture. Dr. Janet Travell, the Mother of dry needling^[8], and Fan, et al^[9] also mentioned that, historically and academically, dry needling is

acupuncture, just a synonym or different names for the same medical therapy.

Dry needling is an issue in the United States (U.S.) because there are some professionals other than acupuncturists, especially physical therapists (PTs), who intend to practice acupuncture under the name of “dry needling”, with very little training. Since dry needling actually is acupuncture, practicing dry needling should require practitioners to abide the FDA law and acupuncture law in each state, including education requirements for the practice of acupuncture. In this article, the authors aim to

investigate the education or training requirements in various regulations for practicing acupuncture among different professionals in the U.S., and find what should be the necessary requirement for physical therapists to practice dry needling in education or training hours.

THE REQUIRED TRAINING IN ACUPUNCTURISTS IS MINIMAL 1 905 HOURS

Most Americans became acquainted with acupuncture after 1972, when President Nixon's Secretary of State, Henry A. Kissinger, traveled to China. At that time, the *New York Times*' famous journalist James Reston reported his personal experience with acupuncture emergency treatment for his post appendicitis operating abdominal pain, which was the most effective "ignition" of the long lasting "fire" of American's "acupuncture fever"^[10]. However, the beginning of acupuncture in the U.S. can actually be traced back to the 1820s.

Acupuncturists get acupuncture education or training in the U.S. from accredited schools

The earliest acupuncture schools in the U.S. started around the 1970s, and growth increased during the 1980s^[11-12] and 1990s^[11-14]. Currently, there are more than 70 schools or programs accredited by the Accreditation Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine^[13] (ACAOM, which approved by the U.S. Department of Education) offering master degrees of acupuncture and Oriental medicine all over the U.S. The graduated students of these master programs (three years study, post the bachelor degree) are all oriented towards meeting the requirements of the acupuncturist license in 46 states and District of Columbia^[13-14].

In the U.S., there currently only are two organizations, National Certification Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine (NCCAOM) and California Acupuncture Board (CAB), that offer the licensing or certificate examinations for acupuncturists.

NCCAOM requires acupuncturists get minimal 1 905 education hours before taking the licensing examination

NCCAOM offers a certificate examination whose diploma is recognized by 45 states and the District of Columbia, excluding the state of California^[15]. NCCAOM's applicants can have graduated from different programs: Acupuncture program and Oriental Medicine Program, although both programs have to be accredited by ACAOM^[13]. The acupuncture program

(usually a Masters degree) requires a minimum of 3 years or 1 905 hours training including 705 hours of acupuncture theory and techniques, 660 acupuncture clinic hours, 450 hours of biomedicine, and 90 hours in counselling, communication, ethics, and practice management. Oriental medicine program (also usually a Masters degree) requires a minimum of 4 years or 2 625 hours training including 705 hours of Oriental medicine and acupuncture theory, practice and techniques; 450 hours of didactic Oriental herbal studies, 870 hours of acupuncture and Chinese herbology clinic, 510 hours of biomedicine, 90 hours of counselling, communication, ethics, and practice management^[16].

CAB requires acupuncturists get minimal 3 000 education hours before taking the licensing examination

CAB offers an independent licensure examination for the graduate students from 38 acupuncture schools or programs approved by the Board (22 in California and 16 in other states)^[17]. CAB requires minimum 3,000 hours training including clinic internship for all the applicants applying for its licensure examination after January 1, 2005^[18]. Within such acupuncture schools or programs approved by the CAB, the shortest length of a program requirement is 3 022.5 total hours training, and the longest length of program requirement is 5 880 hours training^[19].

All the other acupuncture schools whose student graduates are applying for NCCAOM examination usually have less training hours than those of schools approved by CAB. It is because most of the state acupuncture boards do not require 3 000 hours training for licensed acupuncturists. For example, Arizona Acupuncture Board requires a total of 1 850 hours training including 800 hours clinic internship^[20], and the Connecticut Acupuncture Board requires 1 905 hours training including 660 hours clinic internship effective since October 01, 2012^[21].

In recent years, ACAOM developed a new acupuncture training program called First Professional Doctorate (FPD), which is a four years' college training program, with a total of 121 (in acupuncture)-162 (in Oriental medicine) semester credits, with at least 3,500 hours in didactic and clinical training^[22]. It is a good step to raise the training level of acupuncturist from that of a Masters degree to that of a Doctorate degree nationwide, and eventually replace the Masters degree with a Doctorate degree to improve the education quality of this profession.

Some acupuncturists had acupuncture and Chinese medicine education from countries overseas, such as the People's Republic of China, in which the education for becoming an acupuncturist is equivalent to that of a medical doctor level's training in traditional Chinese medicine, which lasts from 5 years to 8 years, with more than 5 500 hours of school training.

THE MINIMA TRAINING REQUIRED FOR PHYSICIAN ACUPUNCTURISTS IS ABOVE 300 HOURS

Physician acupuncturists, such as medical doctors (MDs) in the U.S., need 4 years of medical school and at least a three-year residency to get their medical license; then the AAMA will still train them for 300 additional hours in acupuncture. Other physician acupuncturists, such as dentists and chiropractors, have similar requirements that must be met in order to be licensed to practice acupuncture.

MDs' trainings to get their medical license^[23]

In the U.S., in most cases, qualified students begin their medical educations after they have graduated from a four-year undergraduate studies program and have earned a Bachelor's degree in science or art, which is a similar requirement to the students applying the schools in acupuncture and oriental medicine. Then the medical education is an additional four years of education at one of the U.S. medical schools accredited by the Liaison Committee on Medical Education (LCME), consisting of preclinical and clinical parts. After completing medical school, students earn their doctor of medicine degrees (MDs), although some physicians receive a doctor of osteopathic medicine (DO) from a college of osteopathic medicine. The medical graduate then receives even more education and training via the residency program through a national matching program. Newly graduated MDs enter into a residency program that is three to seven years or more of professional training under the supervision of senior physician educators. The length of residency training varies depending on the medical specialty chosen: family practice, internal medicine, and pediatrics, for example, require 3 years of training; general surgery requires 5 years. Some refer to the first year of residency as an "internship". In addition, there is a Fellowship, which is one to three years of additional training in a subspecialty; this is an option for some doctors who want to become highly specialized in a particular field, such as gastroenterology, a subspecialty of internal medicine and of pediatrics, or child and adolescent psychiatry, also a subspecialty.

Taking 300 hours of systematic acupuncture education and 500 cases clinical acupuncture treatments to become a physician acupuncturist^[24]

Physician acupuncturists are also called medical acupuncturists. To acquire board certification, physicians must receive instruction through one of the eight acupuncture training programs (6 in the U.S. and 2 in Canada) approved by the American Board of Medical Acupuncture (ABMA). Summarized below are the required prerequisites and hours of actual training and education that physicians who obtain board certification in acupuncture receive (as most do whom are serious about incorporating acupuncture into their practice and advancing the profession):

1. *General Prerequisites:* MD or DO from the U.S. or Canada. Must have a valid medical license and be board certified in their medical specialty (e.g. anesthesia, pediatrics, obstetrics and gynecology, i.e. OB/GYN, etc.).

2. *Acupuncture Education & Training:* 300 hours of systematic acupuncture education through an ABMA Approved Training Program; 200 hours of which meet the standards set forth by the World Health Organization (WHO) and 100 hours of acupuncture-specific clinical training given over the time period specified by those training programs.

3. *Experience After Didactic Education:* Not less than 2 years of medical acupuncture experience with case histories of 500 clinical acupuncture treatments. The acupuncture practice should include two or more of the following acupuncture disciplines: Auricular, Scalp, Korean Hand, and other styles not necessarily taught in the course curriculum (like Traditional Chinese Medicine, Five-Element, etc.).

4. *Board Examination:* National Board Exam based on Acupuncture Energetics within the Biomedicine model (this is the medical acupuncture, equivalent of the NCCAOM exam.).

This is a 2 to 3 year time commitment for any physician seeking board certification in medical acupuncture. This is very far from the "200 hours" or "weekend course" that someone assumes physicians receive in order to begin treating patients with acupuncture. MDs acupuncturist can only practice acupuncture within their licensed specialty, such as anesthesia, internal medicine, OB/GYN, etc. American Association of Medical Acupuncture membership

requires a minimal 300 hours of acupuncture training after MDs get their medical license^[25].

Other physicians, such as dentists and chiropractors who have 4 years of specialized physician educations, have similar requirements to get certificates to perform acupuncture, and only within their original licensed specialty as well^[26-27].

THE PROPOSED TRAINING REQUIRED FOR PHYSICAL THERAPISTS IS 54 HOURS

In the U.S., PTs have been licensed at the entry-level of master degree in Physical Therapy, and PTs education gradually moves to the doctor degree level, named as Doctor of Physical Therapy (DPT), none of these Master or Doctoral degree including in dry needling or say acupuncture^[28-30]. Dry needling was mainly developed and highly advertised by licensed acupuncture professionals who have worked with PTs since around 2000^[5,28]. Some acupuncture professionals developed a continuing education business and recruited large numbers of PTs as students (even selling the class for several years to the PT associations)^[28]. However, dry needling has mainly been taught in continuing education level courses with of 20–30 hours^[28-29], while some PT organizations mentioned dry needling will be taught in 54 hours^[30]. This obviously is not enough training to qualify a professional to perform acupuncture. The first issue that arises is that there is not proper legislation to allow PTs to practice acupuncture and, therefore, dry needling. The second is that PTs get acupuncture training (under the term of dry needling) from non-approved and non-accredited institutions. The third issue is that the education or training is informal and very short. Reports of serious injuries associated with “dry needling” or acupuncture by PTs^[31-34] are not uncommon and highlight the risks requiring as little as a weekend training in using acupuncture needles before a person could start to inserting acupuncture needles into their patients who have no practical way to know the person’s extremely limited level of training and experience. For the sake of public safety, if PTs are interested in practicing acupuncture, even under the term of dry needling, they should not bypass acupuncture laws that require rigorous training and oversight, and they need to get a formal education in an accredited acupuncture school or program.

CONCLUSION

In the U.S., the acupuncture laws require licensed acupuncturists are required to get a minimal 1,905

hours education or training in an accredited (such as ACAOM) school or program before they apply for the proper license; the physician acupuncturists are required to get a minimal 300 hours education in a board (AAMA) approved acupuncture training institution and 500 case histories of clinical acupuncture treatments to get certified in medical acupuncture. Some physical therapists get 20–30 hours of acupuncture training under the term of dry needling in weekend continuing education classes and want to practice acupuncture. As mentioned before, for the sake of public safety, they should get a formal education in an accredited acupuncture school or program.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None.

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ABSTRACT IN CHINESE

[摘要] 干针是针灸的一种，因此，干针的从业人员必须遵守FDA和各州针灸管理委员会制定的法律。针灸的执业法律，包含了对从业人员基本的针灸教育要求。本文旨在研究美国从事针灸的三大类从业人员的针灸教育和培训背景。研究显示，执照针灸师在申请执照之前，必须在美国教育部授权的认证机构（如ACAOM）认证过的学校或课程班里学习至少1905学时。西医医师，也就是西医针灸师，需要在美国医疗针灸董事局（ABMA）认可的针灸培训机构中学习至少300学时，并有500例临床针灸治案记录，才能得到医疗针灸的认可证书。而一些物理治疗师在周末继续教育学习班以干针的名义只接受20-30小时的针灸培训，从而涉足针灸，这种针灸教育背景显然存在严重不足。为了公众安全起见，理疗师应该在教育部认可的针灸学校或课程班接受正规的针灸教育，然后才能从事针灸。

[关键词] 针灸 干针 理疗 法律范畴 教育