

Acupuncture - safety and legal issues

Acupuncture is part of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) and involves the insertion of needles into specific points on the skin to bring about healing. When correctly performed by a skilled practitioner, acupuncture is a highly effective treatment for a range of disorders, including respiratory illnesses and pain management. Increasing interest in Eastern-style therapeutic systems means that more Australians than ever before are turning to acupuncture, either as a primary form of treatment or as a supplement to their conventional medical care. There are more than 1,800 practitioners of TCM in Australia and increasing numbers of students are being trained in educational facilities across the country every year. Victoria is in the process of implementing the *Chinese Medicine Registration Act 2000*. There is, as yet, no direct regulation by other Australian governments of the practice of TCM. There are, however, state and federal laws that address acupuncture indirectly and help to ensure high standards.

Needle insertion is painless

Some people are afraid that acupuncture will hurt, but the needles used are nothing like hypodermic needles. Acupuncture needles are very fine, around 0.2 mm in width. The needles are inserted into specific points on the skin, with the depth of penetration depending on the symptom or disorder to be treated, and the location of the acupuncture point. The only sensation commonly felt around the insertion site is perhaps a slight warmth or tingling.

Unwanted side effects

In the hands of an unskilled practitioner, acupuncture may lead to a number of problems, including:

- **Allergic reactions** - herbs are sometimes burnt over the skin to create specific points of heat near acupuncture points. Herbs are as powerful as pharmaceutical drugs and need to be treated with the same respect and caution.
- **Infection** - if the needle is unsterile, bacteria can cause local infection. There is also a risk of contracting hepatitis, HIV or any other blood-borne disease if the needles are reused.
- **Injury to the skin** - clumsy insertion, or entry of a needle into a blood vessel, can induce bleeding, bruising and pain.
- **Unexpected side effects** - such as an increase in pain, depression, convulsions or insomnia. Acupuncture can produce significant changes within the nervous system and it is vital that the correct points are stimulated in the right way.

The indirect regulations

Apart from processes being implemented in Victoria, there is currently no direct government legislation overseeing the TCM industry. However, there are indirect laws, including:

- **Drugs and poisoning scheduling** - to restrict access to herbs and herbal substances that are known to be toxic.
- **Skin penetration regulations** - which emphasise the necessity of strict hygiene practices, such as using pre-sterilised, single use and disposable acupuncture needles.
- **Therapeutic Goods Administration** - this government organisation has legislation that requires Good Manufacturing Practice (GMP) for goods that claim to be sterile, which includes acupuncture needles. In order to be legally sold, acupuncture needles have to be included on the Australian Register of Therapeutic Goods.

Choosing a practitioner

When choosing a TCM practitioner, it may be helpful to keep the following suggestions in mind:

- **Association membership** - standards of practice are regulated through industry bodies. Check that your practitioner is a member of a reputable association. You can call the association to crosscheck, if you feel unsure.
- **Qualifications** - some doctors and other health care professionals include acupuncture in their treatment. The new Victorian legislation requires that such registered health care providers satisfy their registration boards that they have satisfactorily completed a course of study or training which qualifies them to practise acupuncture. Acupuncture is a complex philosophy that requires intensive training. Check that your practitioner is fully qualified. If your practitioner is a member of a reputable association, their expertise is assured.
- **Word of mouth** - personal recommendations from friends and colleagues are always valuable.

Where to get help

- Traditional Chinese Medicine practitioner
- Australian Acupuncture & Chinese Medicine Association Tel. (07) 3846 5866

Things to remember

In skilled hands, acupuncture is a highly effective treatment for a range of disorders.

- A reputable and qualified practitioner will be a member of a recognised traditional Chinese medicine association or other suitably endorsed registered health care provider.

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Australian Acupuncture and Chinese Medicine Association

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