In honor of the 8th anniversary of Acupuncture’s inscription to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization’s (UNESCO’s) list of items of “Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity”, a World Acupuncture Day event was held at UNESCO’s headquarters in Paris, France on November 15th, 2018. The American Society of Acupuncturists was honored to be invited to enlighten the 1300 in attendance with a short speech on the status of acupuncture practice in the United States. The speech below was given to fulfill this aim.


For more on World Acupuncture Day, please see: https://www.wad-o.com/en/

For the Facebook Live recording of this speech, please see: https://www.facebook.com/AmericanSocietyofAcupuncturists/videos/192983441579502/

Slide “Title: Development of Acupuncture”

Gracious UNESCO Hosts, Professor Liu Bao-yan, Professor Denis Colin, Organizing committee of World Acupuncture Day, Ladies and Gentlemen, Colleagues, and Friends:

It is a great honor to have this opportunity to give you a window into the status of acupuncture in the United States. In these times in particular, it is profound to have the joy of celebration for a world treasure that brings harmony and healing.
“Birth of Acupuncture”

Acupuncture began as a formal profession back in approximately 1981 to 1982 with the founding of the fundamental organizations regulating the profession. Our organ systems. These included the Accreditation Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine, ACAOM, which created the standards for the academic programs educating acupuncturists as a specific professional group. ACAOM is recognized and overseen by the United States Department of Education.

The Council of Colleges of Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine also came together as a formal business entity in this time, coordinating the work of the collegiate community as programs began to develop.

The National Certification Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine was also founded. NCCAOM provides psychometrically sound, nationally recognized certification testing for acupuncturists, and helps to assure minimal competency in the practice of the medicine. It cannot be stressed enough how important it is in American medical culture to have a sound credential. ACAOM and NCCAOM particularly represent milestones, in that they created the basis for an identifiable, governmentally recognizable, professional group.

The original professional association of acupuncture which was known as the American Association of Oriental Medicine, the “AAOM” (aka “double A OM”) was also formed at that time, and has undergone numerous transformations.
Slide “Recent Milestone”

The acupuncture profession has grown with unprecedented speed over the past 40 years in the United States. In 2018, we achieved the milestone that our foundational structures set us in place to achieve. In 2018, the profession of “Acupuncturist” was formally recognized by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), a governmental organization that recognizes and tracks distinct professions. This recognition creates a uniquely identified, taxable and measurable, professional group. It opens doors to the inclusion of acupuncturists in numerous federal programs, including educational loan repayment programs and other opportunities.
Slide “BLS Physicians”

It facilitates the professional group’s study as an economic entity, and so can help clarify data such as salary trends and legally meaningful employment numbers.

This milestone is the end result of over a decade of work which was spearheaded by the NCCAOM, especially Dr. Kory Ward Cook and Mina Larsen, and to which I had the honor of contributing along with a fine team.
Slide “Founding of the ASA”

In 2015, the organization which I represent, the American Society of Acupuncturists, was founded. We represent a sort of budding off of an organization that was a merger with a permutation of other organizations that were rebranded and all root back to the AAOM. It is very straight forward, and likely familiar story, for those of you in professional association politics. The ASA grew, in actuality, quite organically out of nearly a decade of collaboration among state level associations representing licensed acupuncturists, and ASA as a structure represents a maturation of those relationships, and we hope an evolution in structure. Similar in form to the ETCMA, we are now a federation style organization working to represent acupuncture at state, national, and international levels.

We continue to grow as we establish infrastructure and benefits for our member associations, and currently have 27 full member associations representing approximately 4000 licensed acupuncture practitioners. We are in direct contact with virtually all other non-ethnically based acupuncture groups, meaningfully acting at the state level to affect legislation specific to the practice of “Acupuncturists” as per the new Bureau of Labor Statistics professional designation.
There are currently between 56-62 independent colleges of acupuncture in the United States. These are distributed around the country in a total of 22 states, and offer a total of 95-100 different accredited or pre-accredited programs in study related to acupuncture. (These numbers change relatively rapidly and frequently still.) These programs lead to a number of different degrees, including the Master of Oriental Medicine, a Master of Acupuncture, and Doctoral level degrees. There is also a growing trend for entry level training to reach what is called “entry level doctorate” status, as has been the practice for other professions. Only a handful of schools offer this at present, but it may be the defining trend.
The foundational, educational requirements for acupuncturists in the United States, are variable depending on the program degree sought. The minimal program is 1905 hours with a minimum of 3 years of study for the Master degree that includes acupuncture, but not herbal training. This degree also includes significant training in biomedicine, as well as auxiliary techniques and the core theory. The Oriental Medicine degree includes herbal medicine in the studies, and is a minimum of 2625 hours obtained over a 4-year training program. Other degrees have their own requirements, and newer degrees are in development.
Currently acupuncture is regulated in almost every state. There are three states still without any regulation, although there is some movement in those States to create practice acts. Michigan is in a state of transition from acupuncturists having only title protection and general recognition as a group, but no formal practice act, to having full entitlement as a formal profession. Another significant sign of growth. That process is being facilitated by our member organization, the Michigan Association of Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine, without whom this legislative process would not have occurred at all. They are an excellent example of the impact and importance of our member organizations, and how we sought to create a structure within which these groups can share knowledge and non-financial resources.
The distribution of acupuncturists around the United States is highly variable. This map shows you the basic populations of acupuncturists by state. You can note that a number of States have more than 1000 acupuncturists, and a significant number have between 100 and 999, but California stands out with more than 10,000 practitioners. We are working hard right now to unify California, but it is very difficult.
National certification testing via the NCCAOM is recognized in almost all States aside from California, which still uses the California Acupuncture Boards; there have been a number of years of conversations underway to also recognize the NCCAOM exams. It is widely believed that having a single credential available nationwide would be of great benefit to the profession, further uniting and identifying the professional base. There is some resistance still, however, to allowing this option to California graduates, and this is one of our largest issues at the present time. The resistance to this change comes, interestingly, solely from within the acupuncture profession itself. We hope these issues will be resolved in the near future.
Slide “Growth of the Profession”

This study was just published and is the most thorough look at the questions of how many Licensed Acupuncturists can be identified in the U.S., and what is their distribution. The report also documents trends in the growth of the profession.

In general, numbers of presumed graduates prior to this report hovered between 28,000 to 34,000. By the look of the newest numbers of nearly 38,000 no significant decline in entry is yet clearly evident.

Key factors affecting a candidate’s interest for entry into the profession, and hence the general growth of the profession, include, but are not limited to, job prospects post-graduation, including a lack of inclusion in mainstream medical systems, under-developed integrative health systems, and the lack of residency level training opportunities. Practitioners largely still must start their own practices, demanding that they be not only physicians, but also entrepreneurs.

To remedy the business burden portion of starting practices, we are seeing an interesting growth in small to mid-sized level, private, for-profit entities, offering both franchise opportunities and employed positions for licensed acupuncturists. Whether these will ultimately be financially viable remains to be seen. There has also been a strong and stable population of “Community Acupuncturists” who use predominantly distal point treatments, provided in a group setting and offered on a sliding financial scale. This has, in some cases, very effectively expanded acupuncture accessibility into less wealthy socio-economic strata. Final problems of access remain to be solved.
Slide “Public Aid inclusion trends”

Acupuncture is only rarely included in most public health plans, but we have seen some significant milestones in coverage. Public aid programs in a number of states have begun to offer alternative therapies for pain management, largely pressured by the opioid crisis. These forays are frequently seen as “bold” or “dramatic”, and their stability remains highly in question by the mainstream. Nonetheless, these represent milestones in the acceptance and integration of therapies such as acupuncture as we have never seen before. They provide critical opportunities for the government and the public to become comfortable with the utilization of types of care, heretofore seen as “foreign”, and can lead to normalcy, acceptance, and acculturation of especially acupuncture. We hope, eventually, this will also lead to the greater acceptance and appreciation of Chinese medicine as a whole, including its health maintenance principles, as well as its treatment strategies. Our Ohio member association lead the way for inclusion of acupuncture in that state’s plans.
Slide “Regulation of Acupuncture for Physicians”

Most states also regulate the practice of acupuncture by medical doctors and osteopathic doctors. Thirty-three States note acupuncture to be in scope for these professionals. In these states, it is the individual physicians' responsibility to ensure that they are appropriately trained and competent to provide acupuncture as licensed physicians. Mandated training of generally 200-300 hours is specified in another 10 States. 3 states require doctors to be trained at the same level as non-physician practitioners, and 4 states have not ruled on Medical Doctor practice.
Slide “AAMA”

Despite the variation in the entry level requirements, most physicians will opt to take at least 200 hours of training, and many go on to study acupuncture in depth, either through other North American programs, in China, or through apprenticeships. The AAMA holds an annual academic meeting each year for physicians, and this also serves as a very valuable training and professional development opportunity for this licensure group.

The introduction of acupuncture by medical doctors into hospitals and other medical settings around the United States has played a critical role in the acceptance and expansion of acupuncture practice in general. Without these professionals, acupuncture would not have achieved such great strides in such a short period of time. Our Chinese colleagues often walk between our training worlds, and have played essential roles in fostering the development of Chinese medicine for all licensure types.
Slide “Collaboration”

Just as ASA represents a federation of state associations with united purpose, so are we seeing the maturation of a number of other federation style groups. Groups such as the Integrative Healthcare Policy Consortium. Organizations such as these are achieving the levels of representation needed to be of true federal interest.
We are seeing agencies such as the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs leading the call to integrative and wholistic care. The Department of Defense is also considering ways to integrate acupuncture and acupuncturists into its hospital care structure.
Slide “Acupuncture’s Role”

In collaboration with a number of major Chinese groups, ASA assisted in the creation of a white paper reviewing Acupuncture’s Role in the American Opioid Epidemic. The opioid epidemic has driven intense searching for new healthcare solutions in the U.S. It is widely recognized that acupuncture is likely to play a valuable role in the effort to reduce the use of and addiction to opioids.
Slide “US HR 6”

And just last month, as of October 24th, in keeping with these trends, U.S. HR 6 was signed into law. This document is primarily a call for study on ways our Medicare and Medicaid services can improve care related to opioids and pain, but is the first document of its type and at this level to mention acupuncture. It is another small but truly monumental achievement.
Slide “Outlook”

Overall, we must be able to appreciate how profoundly positive the trend for acupuncture’s inclusion into the U.S. healthcare system appears to be at present. All indicators point towards greater and greater acceptance and utilization. There are still significant challenges to the acceptance of, or even foundational appreciation for, the rich cultural treasure that is the totality of Chinese medicine. However, with the phenomenal growth that we have seen over the past approximately 40 years for the profession, I am optimistic that a greater appreciation will most certainly emerge.
Thank you!