

PART 1: ASA Town Hall State of the Profession Report, "Where Do We Go From Here?"

*Please click here <https://www.nccaom.org/nccaom-webinars-posted/townhalls-meetings/> to access the ASA Town Hall video for full information and data sources.

The January 18th, ASA Town Hall, "**Where Do We Go From Here,**" delivered uncomfortable facts and an eye-opening analysis of the profession and its position within the healthcare marketplace.

Key speaker, ASA Chair, Dr. Olivia Hsu Friedman, DACM, LAc, recounted the undeniable inequities and challenges that LAc's face in all areas of their practice:

- Limited patient access
- Low comparative earning potential
- Few job opportunities
- Inaccurate perceptions of status and credibility
- Public confusion about LAc skill sets and services
- Lack of awareness of the full scope of our medicine, and more.

She presented the ASA's analysis in terms of "strengths," "weaknesses," "opportunities," and "threats," a.k.a., SWOT analysis, a standard business tool for strategic self-assessment and planning.

Here are the FACTS:

Strengths

- LAc's are the most qualified providers to deliver acupuncture.
 - In fact, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS), the federal agency within the United States Department of Health and Human Services, cites the unique education credentials of LAc's, a degree from an accredited AOM institution, as a requirement to provide the service.
 - However, LAc's are not as yet credentialed providers within the CMS system which requires an act of Congress.
- <https://www.medicare.gov/coverage/acupuncture>>

Weaknesses and Threats

- Our Marketplace Has **CHANGED**
 - In the 1980's only LAc's were practicing acupuncture.
 - Today, physical therapists, chiropractors and nurses can now practice a form of acupuncture and other groups want to add it to their scope. With acupuncture's effectiveness and popularity, these efforts will only increase.

- Public Awareness of Our Medicine is **LOW**

- A *very small* percentage of the US population actually uses our services, and only a small percentage knows that LAcS exist and for what conditions they may seek our services.
- Our Access to All Available Patients is **LOW**
 - Unlike LAcS, *all* the other types of practitioners who are either doing, or hope to be doing, acupuncture are covered by *all* types of insurance. This gives them *full access* to the patient population.
 - For reference, according to the 2021 Census, over **91%** of all Americans have some form of health insurance:
 - 66% had private insurance, 54% of which was through their employer.
 - 35.7% had public coverage, either Medicare (18.4%) or Medicaid (18.9%), and eligible individuals can enroll in both.
 - In short, if the insured public wants "acupuncture," likely they will seek it through the types of practitioners with whom they are most familiar, which are the ones that are recognized providers in the national healthcare system. Currently, LAcS are neither.
- Cost of Entry to the Profession is **HIGH**
 - Education costs for our students have steadily skyrocketed. The average student is leaving school with more than \$100K in debt. With doctoral programs this can *double*, bringing totals to around \$200K.
 - This would be fine if earnings were *high, immediate* and *steady*, but this is generally not the case for LAcS.
- The Typical Success Rate of Someone Coming into this profession is **LOW**
 - The average annual income is \$50K at 3 years in practice.
 - LAcS are *not* seen as doctors by banks. They are seen as small businesses and, in the US, only 50% survive 5 years. For LAcS that means it can be hard to get business loans. ■ The typical doctor is *never* turned away for a loan. This is because they are part of a national healthcare system and their business is driven by insurance networks and provider referrals which makes them a "sure bet."
- The # of Jobs That Are Non-Private Are **LOW**
 - There are *few* jobs available for LAcS, and as a result **89%** of us work in some kind of private practice.

Opportunities

"If you do not change direction, you may end up where you are headed." Lao Tzu

Despite the discouraging information presented, Dr. Friedman reminded attendees that there was a way forward, and referred to the federal recognition of LAcS as Medicare providers.

She stated that while this is not an "instant" solution, it would be the *first step* to addressing *all* of the most critical challenges the profession is facing:

- LAcS would finally be a **choice** for patients receiving care in the national health care system and would represent **unprecedented elevation of the profession**.
- Having parity with other nationally recognized providers would provide a solution to **end scope encroachment**.
 - Once the public has **full access** to us, they will be able to see the full scope of our medicine and finally be able to understand the difference between us and other providers. In other words, we will effectively have irrefutable ownership of our medicine.
- Inclusion would be the gateway to create **more LAc jobs** in hospitals and in traditional healthcare models, helping new grads position themselves for success instead of uncertainty.
- With a broader proliferation of jobs in traditional healthcare models, **public awareness** of our *whole system* of medicine will surge, which is good news for those running private practices as well.
- Our students would have opportunities to qualify for **loan forgiveness** programs, which would encourage new students to *enter* the profession and help practitioners to *stay* in the profession.
- Medicare often dictates what other insurance companies cover, so it will be the first step toward **raising the standards** by which acupuncture services are handled by insurers.
- Medicare collects data on care delivered which means we will have a **credible data source** that is used for *free* research that is disseminated regularly and broadly.
 - This means **free research** for public relations and promotion, which is typically *cost-prohibitive* for practitioners and even professional organizations like the ASA.
 - That will open the door for **MD referrals** to us as well, more good news for those in private practice.

Challenges

Not Enough LAc Support

Thus far, the benefits of Medicare provider status have been out of reach due to inadequate support from the LAc community for legislative efforts on our behalf. California Congresswoman Judy Chu (CA-28) has long championed the profession by introducing bills to provide greater public access to our medicine.

The most recent bill, HR 4803, "Acupuncture for Our Seniors Act," was introduced in July of 2021 and did not garner enough congressional interest for it to advance before the close of the 117th Congress on January 3, 2023.

It would take a focused, organized effort on the part of LAcS and our professional organizations to generate enough legislative support to pass any future bills.

Clarification Needed

Misinformation and misunderstandings surrounding the topic of Medicare inclusion have also plagued efforts to engage the LAc community. Dr. Friedman targeted these with strong statements:

*"LET ME BE CLEAR, Medicare inclusion is not going to not solve all of the profession's problems in one fell swoop or overnight...[It] is the **first and only step we have right now**...to finally enter the federal healthcare model and sit at all of the important tables to further promote our medicine in all the ways we need."*

*"I am NOT saying that Medicare or the current healthcare model is perfect...However, it is the current system and if we want OUR whole system of medicine to be considered a **legitimate healthcare option**, we have to be included in every part of it."*

*"I am also NOT saying that every practitioner has to take Medicare in their practice...If the profession is included and recognized by Medicare, as a private practitioner you will never be forced to do anything that doesn't align with the way you want to practice. **The option to opt out will always be your option to choose.**"*

To end this part of the presentation, she went on to galvanize the message she wanted attendees to remember:

"So what I AM saying is that if we don't take action to change the course of our profession, acupuncture will live on in a reduced form, practiced by practitioners who are far less trained than any of us and the whole system of medicine and the best practitioners to practice it are going to become extinct."

As mentioned before, our profession's founding mothers and fathers worked so hard to make sure that we could practice today.

"Now is OUR turn as the current mothers and fathers to secure a better future for our students so that they can carry the torch of this medicine forward..."

This concludes **PART 1: ASA Town Hall State of the Profession Report, "Where Do We Go From Here?"**
NEXT ISSUE: **PART 2**

- ASA and NCCAOM Join Forces to Raise Legislative Awareness of Our Profession
- How Every LAc Can Support the Future of Our Medicine