

# Acupuncturists



## Occupational Brief Title Codes:

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- G.O.E.: 02.03.04
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## Occupational Subtitles:

- Acupressurists

## Work Classification Based Related

### D.O.T. Occupations:

- Emergency Medical Technicians
- Physician Assistants
- Registered Professional Nurses

## Interests Based Related

### G.O.E. Occupations:

- Chiropractors
- Massage Therapists
- Naturopathic Physicians

## Skills Based Related

### O\*NET Occupations:

- Occupational Therapists
- Physical Therapists
- Respiratory Therapists

## Noteworthy Quote:

*"The practice of Oriental Medicine is steeped in history and has been practiced for more than 3,000 years around the world. It has only been since the 1970s, when the United States reestablished diplomatic relations with China, that Oriental Medicine began to take a significant foothold in the U.S. Today, Oriental Medicine in this country is a growing professional system of medicine with 42 states requiring NCCAOM certification or examinations for licensure. There are over 20,000 certified Oriental Medicine practitioners in the U.S., more than 40 federally-recognized and accredited teaching institutions, a federally supported Center of Complementary and Alternative Medicine at the National Institutes of Health, and—most importantly—millions of Americans seeking these services"*

—Kory Ward-Cook, National Certification Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine, Jacksonville, FL

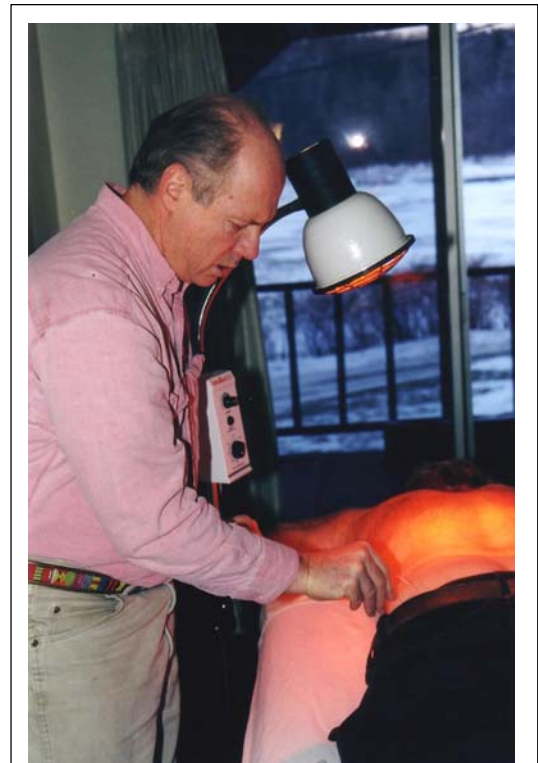
**Acupuncturists** (a-cu-punc-tur-ists) insert fine, solid, wire-thin needles into the skin at specific points in the body in order to alter physiological function, sometimes described in terms of energy (Qi or Chi) flow and thus relieve pain, or alter the function of an organ, or affect one or more body systems.

Acupuncture is an art of healing first practiced in China. Records describing Chinese medicine date back to the Shang and Zhou Dynasties, several thousand years before the common year. Since then, Oriental physicians have used acupuncture to treat ailments. In 200 A.C.E., Hua Tuo a Chinese physician kept a record of his treatments. This record was destroyed, but in the 1800's Sun Sing-Yen compiled an account of the physician's work. In 1960, the Peking School of Chinese Medicine used this account to put together a simplified list of illnesses along with the treatments for them.

Acupuncturists maintain that their practice alters Qi (or Chi), energy that flows through the channels or meridians in the body. As long as the movement of Qi remains harmonious, the person stays healthy. Pain and illness appear when Qi is not in a state of harmony. Acupuncturists detect and treat this imbalance at points along the channels. By inserting needles at specific points along the channels, acupuncturists can regulate Qi or energy in a specific meridian or part of the body.

Acupuncture has gained increasing attention since the early 1970's. Studies have shown that acupuncture facilitates the release of endorphins, bolstering the body's natural immune function. Acupuncture has gained an impressive following in the United States. An estimated twenty million Americans have tried acupuncture for chronic pain, fatigue, arthritis, digestive problems, substance abuse, and a range of other ailments. Acupuncture is also being used in veterinary health care to treat animals, helping to negate the assertion that acupuncture functions only according to placebo affect.

In 1997, the National Institutes of Health issued a Consensus Statement recognizing the efficacy of acupuncture in adult postoperative and chemotherapy nausea and vomiting and in postoperative dental pain. The Consensus Statement also stated that acupuncture may be useful as an adjunct treatment, as an acceptable



*Acupuncturists insert needles into the skin at certain points and depths for specific organs or illnesses.*

*Photo by CGP*

alternative, or be included in a comprehensive management program for other health conditions such as addiction, stroke rehabilitation, headache, menstrual cramps, tennis elbow, fibromyalgia, myofascial pain, osteoarthritis, low back pain, carpal tunnel syndrome, and asthma. Today, the World Health Organization also recognizes that acupuncture proves effective for a broad range of pain, ailments, and disease.

### **Work Performed**

To treat a patient, acupuncturists first go over the information that the patient completes as part of the intake process including his/her medical history. They listen to the patient's account of the illness or condition and check for any pain. They learn what illnesses the patient has had in the past, and the treatment for them. They want to know the nature of the individual's complaint, its intensity, and physiological or psychological effects. They also want to know about any other problems the patient is experiencing. A patient with a pain in the chest, for instance, may also have dizziness or fatigue. This information gives the acupuncturist clues to treatment strategy for the root cause of the condition.

The next step is to check the patient's pulses. Acupuncturists determine the rate and the quality or force of the patient's pulses at several locations on each of the patient's wrists. Acupuncturists learn to find, judge, and classify twenty-eight distinct qualities of the pulse. Acupuncturists may also look at a person's tongue for evidence of imbalance. By evaluating the pulses and tongue, and other examination results, acupuncturists determine the source of illness or pain.

They then decide what points they will use. According to recent estimates, there are more than 360 known acupuncture points positioned along meridians in the body. Acupuncturists know where to insert the needles, how deep to insert them, how long to leave them in, and how often they will use them. Licensed acupuncturists use single-use disposable sterilized, surgical, stainless steel, solid needles varying in length and thickness, often as fine as a human hair.

Acupuncture patients may lie down or sit for treatment depending on the area being needled. Acupuncturists swab each point with alcohol and then insert needles at points and depths predetermined from examination findings. The sensation felt by the patient on the insertion of the needles varies from person to person, but it is usually described as a slight pinch or warming sensation.

The needles usually remain in place from ten to thirty minutes but in some cases longer. For a strong effect, such as that required for anesthesia or for treatment of pain in arthritic joints, acupuncturists may twirl the needles from time to time. They may also connect the needles to a low level electrical stimulation device. Some may use high tech methods such as laser or colored light stimulation.

Acupuncturists sometimes use moxibustion in conjunction with acupuncture. They ignite moxa (leaves from the mugwort plant) and hold it near the skin to produce a warming sensation. There is also a technique called direct moxa. In this procedure, the acupuncturist rubs the area to be treated with a salve. A rice grain-sized piece of moxa is then placed

directly on the skin and burned. It is snuffed out as it touches the skin.

Acupuncturists cease treatment after a specified time or as soon as they note an improvement. They can recognize a change for the better in the patient's appearance, when the patient says the pain is gone, or by the action of the patient's pulse. The number of treatment sessions varies with the gravity of the illness. For acute and chronic conditions, acupuncturists may give treatments more than once a week. Acupuncturists may also prescribe the use of herbs, recommend dietary changes, or have the patient do exercises.

Sometimes, acupuncturists use finger pressure on the acupuncture points instead of needles, called acupressure. *Acupressurists* focus on a painful area or trigger point in a muscle. Using the fingers or an instrument, such as a rounded piece of wood, the acupressurist applies concentrated pressure on the irritated area in order to deactivate the trigger point. (More information on acupressure is located in our brief on *Massage Therapists*.)

### **Working Conditions**

Acupuncturists may have their own office or work in the clinic of an acupuncture school or in a hospital. Some may divide their time between these settings. Acupuncturists usually have treatment rooms where they treat their patients, and an office for clerical duties such as filling out charts and maintaining patients' files. Their work space is quiet and peaceful, which helps patients feel at ease.

The equipment is simple. A padded table with pillows helps make the client comfortable. Soft background music, scented candles, and/or incense are often used as a part of the ambiance. Although their work is not particularly strenuous, acupuncturists are on their feet a great deal of the time. Some acupuncturists work alone. Some may have a support staff to help with clerical duties. Others work as part of a larger team of health practitioners.

### **Hours and Earnings**

Acupuncturists work by appointment or on a "first-come, first-serve" basis. A session with a client lasts between a half hour to an hour (a first visit is often longer). Acupuncturists usually work thirty to forty hours a week, six to eight hours a day. Some may work evenings or weekends to accommodate clients' schedules. A typical acupuncturist may see from eight to twelve patients a day.

Most acupuncturists are self employed so wages vary greatly depending on the geographic location and the kind of practice; the acupuncturists' skills, services, and level of experience; as well as the number of clients they have, the hours they work, and client tipping habits. Those in major cities in New York and California, for instance, often charge higher fees than those in the midwest. In general, acupuncturists typically charge \$50 to \$200 for an initial appointment and \$35 to \$120 for subsequent visits.

According to recent job postings, average salaries were between \$30,000 and \$60,000 a year. However, gross annual income for acupuncturists can reach as high as \$105,000 a

year, depending on the practice. For example, practitioners who work in hospitals made over \$65,000 a year, while practitioners who worked for non-profit organizations made under \$35,000 a year.

Acupuncturists who work full-time as an employee of an organization often receive typical benefits, such as paid holidays, vacation time, and sick leave; health and life insurance; and a retirement plan. Self-employed acupuncturists may work on a contract basis for facilities which offer acupuncture services or set up an office. They must furnish their own equipment and supplies, pay for liability insurance, a self-employment tax, and arrange for their own benefits. If permitted by the state, some acupuncturists lower their cost by working out of their own homes.

### **Education and Training**

In the United States, some acupuncture and Oriental medicine educational programs require that entering students hold at least a bachelor's degree. Others may require a background of two years of college consisting of general studies from an accredited school. High school and undergraduate students should take courses in physical and social sciences, including biology, chemistry, health, psychology, anatomy, Asian history and culture, and English.

The Accreditation Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine (ACAOM) is the only national accrediting agency in the United States that is recognized by the U.S. Department of Education to accredit acupuncture and Oriental medicine programs. In 2007, ACAOM accredited around 49 programs of study, but were evaluating another 10 candidate programs for possible accreditation.

ACAOM-accredited programs of acupuncture in schools and colleges require a minimum of three years of full-time acupuncture study for a Masters degree in Acupuncture (MA). Requirements for this degree include completion of 1,905 hours of acupuncture study of which 660 hours are clinical practice. Four-year programs in Oriental medicine typically include studies in Chinese herbology and integrated acupuncture, massage, and herbal clinical training leading to the Master's in Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine (MAOM) degree. Requirements for this degree include the completion of 2,625 hours of Oriental Medicine study including 870 hours of clinical practice.

Some programs offer night or part-time programs and allow students to take up to five years to finish their degree. There are also several doctorate programs. Many acupuncture and Oriental medicine programs provide advanced standing to health professionals. The American Academy of Medical Acupuncture also provides accelerated training for licensed physicians (MD or DO) and chiropractors (DC).

Basic courses consist of Oriental medical theory, diagnosis, and treatment techniques in acupuncture and related studies; clinical training; certain biomedical clinical sciences; and counseling, communication, ethics, and practice management. Students learn Oriental medical theory and acupuncture diagnostic and treatment techniques. They also learn the clean needle technique so that they

know how to prepare the treatment area and the patient for needling.

### **Licensing, Certification, Unions and Professional Societies**

Most states require acupuncturists to be licensed or registered in order to practice. Many license acupuncturists for independent practice. However, some states require licensed acupuncturists to work under medical supervision, while a few states only permit licensed physicians or chiropractors to practice acupuncture.

Forty-two states and the District of Columbia recognize the national certification program or examinations of the National Certification Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine (NCCAOM) Certification as their primary criteria for licensure. NCCAOM offers certification in acupuncture, Oriental medicine, Chinese herbology, and Asian bodywork therapy. Certification by NCCAOM requires at least three years of formal study at an ACAOM-accredited school, and passage of the NCCAOM board examinations.

Some states, such as Texas, California, and Nevada, set additional eligibility criteria, such as additional academic or clinic hours, or have their own exam. A small number of states also have additional practical examination requirements, such as passing the Clean Needle Technique (CNT) exam. When adding acupuncture to an already existing license (MD, DO, or DC), the number of hours of training required in each state also varies greatly. Applicants should check with the appropriate state board for specific criteria.

There are a number of professional societies which represent the acupuncture and Oriental medicine field. Examples include the Council of Colleges of Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine; the American Association of Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine; and the American Organization for Bodywork Therapies of Asia; the Society for Acupuncture Research; the National Acupuncture Detoxification Association; and the International Veterinary Acupuncture Society.

### **Personal Qualifications**

Acupuncturists must have patience and perseverance to complete the years of work and study required to learn their skills. They should be able to communicate and get along well with all kinds of people. They should be able to gain their trust and confidence. Acupuncturists must be ethical, responsible, and compassionate in dealing with patients.

Occupations can be adapted for workers with disabilities. Persons should contact their school or employment counselors, their state office of vocational rehabilitation, or their state department of labor to explore fully their individual needs and requirements as well as the requirements of the occupation.

### **Where Employed**

There are about 20,000 licensed acupuncturists in the United States. Many are concentrated in cities on the East and West coasts. Most acupuncturists are self-employed in a private practice. However, an increasing number of acupuncturists are finding positions in hospitals and integrated clinic

settings. Others work in public health and in the field of chemical dependency, as well as in research and educational institutions.

### **Employment Outlook**

The prospects for acupuncturists are good and the profession is growing steadily. This trend is expected to continue through the first half of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Likewise, more people are turning to complementary and alternative medicine to supplement their health care. Although Medicare and Medicaid have yet to pay for acupuncture treatments, an increasing number of insurance companies reimburse for certain acupuncture services.

### **Entry Methods**

Acupuncturists may get help from the career services office of the school where they learned acupuncture. Networking among professional colleagues may offer job leads and/or locations where a newly qualified acupuncturist could set up a practice. Those who plan to open their own practice should have enough money or financial backing to stay in business long enough to build up a clientele that will support the practice. Other individuals might join an acupuncturist who already has a thriving practice.

### **Advancement**

With clinical experience and continuing education, acupuncturists can expand their knowledge and skills. In 2002, the profession introduced post-graduate clinical doctoral programs for those who wish to continue their education in specialized fields of acupuncture and in Oriental medicine. Master's level acupuncturists may now obtain a clinical doctorate in several specialty areas. They can enlarge their practice in their community and thus increase their earnings. Some go on to teaching positions in accredited programs.

### **For Further Research**

**Accreditation Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine**, Maryland Trade Center #3, 7501 Greenway Center Drive, Suite 760, Greenbelt, MD 20770. Web site: [www.acaom.org](http://www.acaom.org)

**American Association of Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine**, P.O. Box 162340, Sacramento, CA 95816. Web site: [www.aaaonline.org](http://www.aaaonline.org)

**Council of Colleges of Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine**, 3909 National Drive, Suite 125, Burtonsville, MD 20866. Web site: [www.ccaom.org](http://www.ccaom.org)

**National Certification Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine**, 76 South Laura Street, Suite 1290, Jacksonville, FL 32202. Web site: [www.nccaom.org](http://www.nccaom.org)

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