

British Acupuncture Council Votes for Self-Regulation

Editorial Staff

It wasn't long ago - June 1995, to be precise - that the five member groups of the United Kingdom's Council for Acupuncture came together to discuss the state of the profession in their country. At that time, it was agreed that the practice of acupuncture should be governed by one body, which would represent the interests of professionally qualified acupuncturists in all aspects of their work.

The result of the meeting was the birth of the British Acupuncture Council (BAC). Since its inception, the Council has profoundly influenced the way acupuncture is practiced and perceived in the UK. As the practice of acupuncture is not regulated by the British government, the BAC fills a much-needed void by helping to maintain standards of education, ethics, practice and discipline to ensure the health and safety of the public. It is also committed to promoting research and enhancing the role that traditional acupuncture can play in the country's overall health and well-being.

The BAC recently took its role as regulator and educator one step further, when its members voted overwhelmingly in favor of statutory self-regulation at the Council's annual meeting in October. With two-thirds of the Council's membership in attendance, 90% of those voting supported a plan to develop a regulatory process that calls for greater levels of safety and education, which will protect patients from substandard care and enhance the reputation of the acupuncture profession.

"We have consistently argued for high educational standards as the basis for the registration of acupuncturists," expressed the BAC's chief executive, Mike O'Farrell, "and it is most encouraging to have this level of endorsement from our members."

The most important aspect of the plan will be the formation of a statutory register of acupuncturists, which would be charged with regulating, developing and promoting the profession. Similar regulatory bodies for chiropractors and osteopaths already exist in the UK, and have been highly successful in the advancement of those professions.

O'Farrell remarked that the new register would be of great value to patients, who currently have no way of checking the background of the acupuncturist they see. "The development of a statutory register for the acupuncture profession will become the guarantee of safety and excellence for which patients have long asked," he said.

Practicing acupuncturists will have the opportunity to join the register provided they have met certain qualifications as laid forth by the BAC. Future acupuncturists could also join the register, but only if they graduate from a program or institution recognized by a group such as the British Acupuncture Accreditation Board. The Board currently monitors and governs programs offered at nine Chinese medicine colleges in Great Britain.

The Council's decision has met with approval from others in the health care arena. The Department of Health said that it backed the BAC's plan, and that it was in preliminary talks with Council

representatives.

The British Medical Association has also shown its support for a statutory register of acupuncturists. In a statement released after the vote, a spokesman for the association said, "We support statutory regulation of acupuncture and other alternative therapies." In the past, the BMA has recommended that patients who belong to the National Health Service, Britain's national health plan, should have more access to acupuncture, and has called for national guidelines on the use of acupuncture for back pain, dental pain, migraines, nausea and vomiting.

MARCH 2002