

Unity

As you read this article in August, think back a few months ago to the end of spring - Memorial Day weekend to be specific. While families were having picnics and looking forward to the start of summer, Illinois Gov. Rod Blagejovich was busy signing a law that had a major impact on the acupuncture profession. The bill outlawed the sale of ephedra, making Illinois the first state in the country to place a ban on ephedra supplements.

Illinois isn't the only state in which herbal supplements have come under attack. Similar laws that would ban the sale of ephedra are moving through the legislatures of New York and California, and in May, Florida Gov. Jeb Bush signed a law that banned the sale of all dietary supplements to children under age 18.

How does something like this happen? More important, where were our profession's leaders at a time like this? What are they doing about it now? Are they doing anything?

I've heard it said that new laws are the best way to increase the scope of practice for acupuncturists and further our profession. While we try to move ahead, we can't forget that legislation is a double-edged sword. Just as a person can write a bill that increases our scope of practice, another person can write a bill that decreases it, or does away with acupuncture and Oriental medicine entirely.

Losing the use of ephedra is a loss to the profession. Ephedra is an essential ingredient in many herbal formulas prescribed by Oriental medicine practitioners. Some states already limited the use of herbal remedies, but the use of an important herb has now been virtually eliminated in one state. The "ban ephedra" ball is rolling. How many other states will follow suit until we do something about it?

Now is the time to unite as a profession - not just to prevent us from losing ephedra, but to stop other groups from bullying us around, and to put us on equal footing with other health care providers. The first step is the creation of an acupuncture/Oriental medicine organization in every state. If you live in a state that doesn't have its own association, take the initiative. Contact the LAcS and DOMs in your area about creating an association, and talk to people in other states to see how their associations operate.

In states that have existing organizations, it's time to step things up a bit. Do you speak with your local politicians? Do you have a public relations department or political action committee? Do you hold open houses for people who want to know more about acupuncture? Do you have a special membership rate for students or new acupuncturists? Do you send out information regularly that highlights the positive benefits associated with acupuncture? If your state association isn't doing these things, it's not doing everything it can to reach out to everyone who could be affected by the profession.

Some of you are shaking your heads after reading this, and do not want to get involved. I know the "reasons" (i.e., excuses) you're going to give:

1. It costs too much; I can't afford to belong to an association.
2. I don't have the time.
3. Associations don't do anything for me.
4. I don't agree with the association's views.
5. Things are fine in my state; what do I have to worry about?

My answers to those reasons are:

1. Actually, you can't afford not to belong. Some associations have discounted fees for certain practitioners; some even have free membership categories.
2. You say you don't have the time? Make the time.
3. If you don't belong to an association, how do you know what it does (or doesn't do) for you?
4. You won't change an association's position by sitting around and complaining about it. Become a member and let the rest of the membership know how you feel. If nothing else, it will give the association a different perspective.
5. Things may be fine now, but that doesn't mean things always will be fine. Don't be reactive - be proactive. Go out and make a change in our profession before someone else decides to change things for you.

If you need help creating an association or improving an existing association, call myself or Michael Devitt; we'll do whatever we can to help you.

Back to Illinois: Just recently I was in Chicago, and spoke with a practitioner who stated she had tried to get a group together to start an organization. She experienced apathy on the part of most of the other providers, however; the reason most commonly given was that no one wanted to get involved in politics.

The acupuncturist I spoke to in Chicago gets it. She understood the importance of having an association, but sadly, it appears that most of her colleagues don't.

Acupuncturists practice acupuncture, but they don't get to decide what they can practice or how they can practice it. Legislators make those decisions. They make the laws that regulate the issuing of licenses and the rules and regulations for the practice of acupuncture and Oriental medicine. Without a strong association, who will legislators turn to?

The time to act is now. Contact your state association and ask about joining. If your state doesn't have an association, call the other acupuncturists in your area and discuss creating one. The sooner you get organized, the better your chances of preventing what happened in Illinois from happening in your state.

AUGUST 2003