

D.C. Acupuncture Society Wins Big Legislative Changes

Alexandra Knox, MAc, LAc

After three years of work with the District of Columbia City Council, the Acupuncture Society of the District of Columbia (ASDC) is on a major political roll. In March, we had two stellar successes in protecting and evolving the practice of acupuncture in Washington, D.C.

The first victory was upholding educational and training standards of acupuncture. A bill first introduced to the city council three years ago to create licensing for naturopaths included acupuncture within the naturopathic scope of practice. Aside from those few naturopaths who pursue dual-track training in naturopathy and acupuncture, naturopaths at best receive only introductory-level education in acupuncture and Oriental medicine. Many naturopathic schools either do not teach Oriental medicine at all, or make such courses electives. The naturopathic bill did not address or stipulate any training in acupuncture or Oriental medicine. The bill clearly would have subjected District of Columbia citizens to the risk of shoddy health care from untrained practitioners.

As of early March, the D.C. City Council amended the bill to stipulate that naturopaths who wished to practice acupuncture would have to meet the district's current regulations to do so. These regulations have been on the books for 14 years. The District of Columbia requires a minimum of 1,725 hours of training and NCCAOM certification or passing an exam created by the district. (Washington, D.C. also has extensive requirements for those who learned their craft through apprenticeships).

In the process of changing the language in the naturopathic bill, we were able to strike the most onerous and unreasonable requirement of the district's acupuncture code: physician collaboration. For years, this requirement has been an obstacle to practice. Until recently, acupuncture was so unfamiliar to doctors that it was difficult to find a physician who would collaborate. Second, the overwhelming majority of physicians have had no way of assessing acupuncture treatments because they lacked training in it.

As of this writing (mid-March), this bill and the change to D.C. acupuncture regulation will go through two more stages: The city council will vote one more time in early April, and then the bill goes to Congress. It is possible for the language to change again, although we understand that is unlikely. So...our work is not quite through!

The turnout for the first (televised) hearing on this bill last September was huge, and held in a packed room. We believe that D.C. legislators had no idea how important complementary health care is to the district's citizens and, of course, its practitioners. This is solid evidence that medical modalities such as ours are in the center of the political radar screen, and we should keep in mind that we have a far larger impact and more leverage than we may realize.

Achieving an amended bill could not have been accomplished without major support from the acupuncture and Oriental medicine community. Our patients and D.C. practitioners were active

voices in opposing the bill, but many organizations were right with us, including the CCAOM, NCCAOM, ACAOM, AAOM, AOM Alliance, the Maryland Acupuncture Society (whom we wish to thank for a major grant of seed money that helped develop ASDC), and our lobbyist, Betsey Haywood of Dickstein, Shapiro, Morin and Oshinsky. Betsy Smith of the NCCAOM, David Molony of the AAOM and David Sale of the CCAOM testified in person with us in September at the first hearing. This is truly a team accomplishment, and shows the strength of results when we all work together.

In tune with changing medical trends, the District of Columbia Board of Medicine is beginning to overhaul its policies and structure. One result is a stronger and more appropriately staffed board of acupuncture within the D.C. Department of Health. ASDC Vice President Kelly Welch was recently appointed to the board, and is responsible for assessing and reviewing applications for acupuncture licensing.

Finally, I must toot the horn of my two colleagues in arms - Lisa Eaves, ASDC's ultra-competent president, and the just-mentioned (and also ultra-competent) Kelly Welch. We are a dynamic team, and we are growing. We welcome advice and comments from our colleagues around the country, and invite any reader or organization to support us by becoming an ASDC member. To contact the ASDC, send an e-mail to lisaeaves@earthlink.net.

MAY 2004