

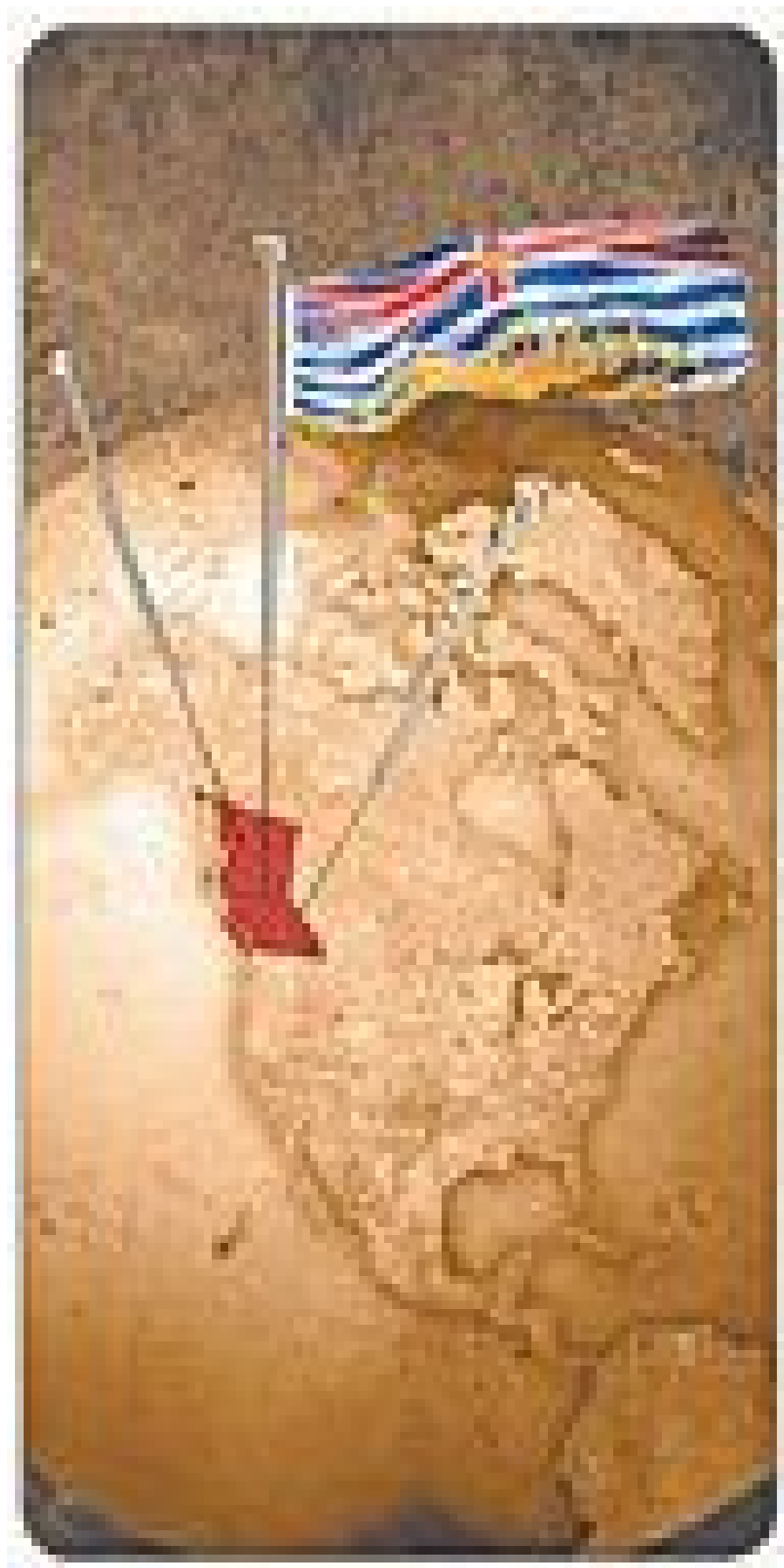
GENERAL ACUPUNCTURE

## **British Columbia Is First Canadian Province to Cover Acupuncture**

LOW-INCOME RESIDENTS QUALIFY

Tina Beychok

Massage therapy and naturopathic medicine are among the alternative health care services available to certain low-income or other disadvantaged residents of British Columbia.



As of April 1, 2008, they can add acupuncture to that menu of covered services. Residents will now qualify for 10 acupuncture visits per year at a reimbursement cost of \$23 CAD per year (about the same in U.S. dollars). This is the same amount of coverage as for chiropractic, massage therapy, naturopathy, physiotherapy and nonsurgical podiatry services.

The 10-visit limit is for all these services combined. For example, a qualified patient can have two massage, two acupuncture and two naturopathic medical visits per year.<sup>1</sup>

The Medical Services Plan (MSP) pays for medically necessary health care for all residents of the province of British Columbia. A certain subset of residents qualifies for what is known as "premium assistance." These recipients would include:

- income-assistance recipients;
- United Nations Convention refugees;
- inmates of correctional facilities;
- individuals enrolled with MSP through the At Home Program;
- residents of long-term care facilities receiving the Guaranteed Income Supplement (GIS);
- individuals enrolled with MSP as mental health clients; and
- individuals with valid coverage through the First Nations and Inuit Health Branch of Health Canada.<sup>2</sup>

According to an article in the *Victoria Times-Colonist*, the B.C. government states that approximately 963,500 residents living in households earning a combined \$28,000 CAD or less a year are covered by this supplementary benefit.<sup>3</sup> An estimated 2 percent of that population will utilize those services initially at a cost to taxpayers of about \$2.2 million CAD, based on an average of five visits per user. Individuals in households with a combined income of more than \$28,000 CAD will have to pay for acupuncture services out of their own pocket or via an extended health care insurance plan.

British Columbia Health Minister George Abbott, who has used acupuncture to treat his running injuries, said acupuncture was "a relatively easy decision" to place on equal footing under MSP benefits with other alternative health care services.<sup>3</sup> "We reviewed national and international literature," Abbott said. "The evidence was quite strong."

According to CTV, Canada's largest private television broadcaster, there currently are approximately 1,200 licensed acupuncturists registered with the College of Traditional Chinese Medicine Practitioners and Acupuncturists of British Columbia ([www.ctcma.bc.ca](http://www.ctcma.bc.ca))<sup>4</sup> Patients will only be eligible for the subsidy if they visit one of these licensed acupuncturists.

Dr. Harvey Hu, president of the British Columbia Qualified Acupuncturists and Traditional Chinese Medicine Practitioners Association, told the *Victoria Times-Colonist*, "It's a real milestone for the [B.C.] health care system and for traditional Chinese medicine. Acupuncture is a very natural therapy; no chemical drugs, just physical stimulation. Very safe."<sup>3</sup>

However, some acupuncturists are raising a cautionary note. Acupuncturist Teresa Crowe told the *Victoria Times-Colonist* that an average visit is \$75. A \$25 visit would only cover something quick and simple, such as auricular acupuncture. "I think it's fantastic that acupuncture is now being recognized as a valuable asset to our health services," Crowe said. "[But at \$23] it's kind of back-handed help."<sup>3</sup>

Ted van Hemert, RAc, a Victoria-based acupuncturist who provides training for Canadian acupuncturists wishing to work on cruise ships, agreed the coverage wasn't much, but he expressed his support for the coverage of acupuncture services. "What will this mean for acupuncturists and the field as a whole in B.C.? Well, it's great to see that we are finally recognized as on par with these other 'supplementary' health services. It gives our field a long-deserved recognition in the West and perhaps brings us one step closer to being recognized as primary health care providers. Twenty-three dollars for 10 visits a year isn't much for many people, but it's a great start!"

Canadian residents also were mixed on the issue of acupuncture coverage. The span of comments on the CTV Web site ranged from wanting the coverage expanded to 12 visits (once per month), to testimonials in favor of AOM treatment, to wondering why acupuncture isn't covered for all B.C. residents.<sup>4</sup>

Time will only tell if the latter will happen, but as one CTV commenter put it, "We should all welcome the mainstream acceptance of this method of pain/disease control. All the other provinces are sure to follow."

### References

1. MSP Information for Supplementary Benefit Practitioners.  
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2. Medical and Health Care Benefits.  
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3. "B.C. first in Canada to cover acupuncture for low-income residents." *Times-Colonist*, March 31, 2008. [www.canada.com/victoriatimescolonist](http://www.canada.com/victoriatimescolonist).
4. "B.C. acupuncture coverage begins April 1."  
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