

First Professional Doctorate: Revolution or Schism?

Guest Author

As a senior acupuncturist, I often ask the question, "What is the benefit of the first professional doctorate (FPD) and, in truth, who will benefit from this degree?" Or for that matter who needs it? I know that I don't need it; I need insurance companies to handle my charges more than I need a FPD.

I can clearly see that this issue will either bring about a revolution or a schism. As the president of one of the oldest educational institutions teaching acupuncture in Florida, I want it to be absolutely clear that I am opposed to the FPD. I could give a dozen reasons for my opinion but first I'd say, "Who needs it?" Neither I nor 20,000 licensed acupuncturists in the United States do. Our master's degree is alive and well.

More education is not the answer for our community. As a matter of fact we have too much education. Ten years ago, the requirement for the master's degree was 2,150 hours of classroom and clinical work. At that time, the ACAOM was adamant in its statement to the Florida Board of Acupuncture that the number of hours was not as important as the number of credits to attain the master's degree. This occurred during the 1997 legislative year.

At that point, there was a strong push to demand a 3,000-hour master's degree program. This 3,000-hour requirement came directly from the AAAOM, including a faction of the Florida State Oriental Medicine Association. As President of FSOMA at the time, I spent many hours at the Florida Board meetings arguing against this ridiculous demand.

In the end, Florida settled for a 2,713-hour requirement for licensure. It really didn't matter what we put in the curriculum to increase it to 2,713 hours. To me it was purely a cosmetic increase, to look good to the medical profession so that we could ask the legislature to grant us the title of Doctor of Acupuncture. It didn't work.

More education does not make you any smarter; it just makes you more educated. Over the years it seems to me the more education people have the less intelligent they act. I am sure to ruffle some feathers with this remark, but then again what do I care. My wife supports me on this issue and in the end as far as I am concerned that is all that matters to me.

What are the benefits of the FPD?

One of the arguments in favor of the FPD concerns the new competencies it will bring into our programs. We have been informed that these new competencies will benefit us by preparing our graduates to be fit to enter into existing medical practices, such as doctors' offices, hospitals, etc.

The truth is that we are in a turf war with those medical practices for patients. When patients use acupuncture as their main source of health care, they develop strong attitudes against drugs and surgery. This is the mainstay of the orthodox medical community. Do you think these guys want us

anywhere near their facilities?

Back in the 1990s, the Heart Institute decided to have medical doctors and acupuncturist work together. They got really good press. Three of my graduates even were hired. After three months, they scrapped the program. My grads tell me that the phone was ringing off the hook all day long, but the institute and the doctors had no real intention of running a collaborative program.

Who will benefit from the FPD?

Colleges will benefit by being able to advertise a FPD under \$150,000. However, the real question is: how will having a FPD increase your patient load? It won't, especially since the development of the Community Acupuncture Network. Graduates are now starting up practices in which fees range from \$15 to \$40, with the average fee being \$20. So instead of paying \$50,000 to enter into the profession, you'll now have to dish out, say, \$70,000 for an FPD. How many \$15 treatments will it take to recover your investment?

Who needs the FPD?

Needs are quite different from wants. Just about everyone wants to get the title of Doctor of Acupuncture, or Doctor of Oriental Medicine. Some of us are willing to go to just about any length to attain this title.

Some current students think that getting a FPD will make their professional life easier. It will bring more patients to their clinic or they will get jobs in hospitals and doctors' offices. Senior practitioners may think it will improve our image for the general public, with the benefit of more patients. No one really thinks that there is a litany of knowledge that we will garner that will improve the care that we give. Everyone is fixated on more patients.

Bringing in New Patients

Let's look at the patient issue. Most of my new patients come from an Internet search. There are several situations that get a patient to your office: they have an ongoing health problem that the orthodox medical community has not been able to satisfactorily address; they were recommended by a friend; you are within five miles of their home or office; and they can afford the fee you charge.

We can deduce from the above that people are looking for alternative means of health care, and acupuncture is definitely on the top of that list. If you've been in the practice for any length of time, I am sure you will agree with me on this.

When I got my Florida license in 1983, I had to go to the public to find patients. Today, the patients go to the Internet to find me. People are looking for acupuncture and they really don't care if you have a master's degree or a first professional doctorate.

People want acupuncture at an affordable fee. I think we need to ask ourselves how we are going to make our medicine available to the American public in the very near future. We don't need a revolution. However, if things keep on going as they are at present, I can surely foresee a schism coming.

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