

It's Time to Hire an Acupuncture Assistant

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Your solo practice has been going for a couple of years. Patients have experienced relief with acupuncture and are referring their family members and friends to your office. Before you knew it, your patient load was growing. The revenues continue to be great, but you feel exhausted at the end of the week. How do you keep going without burning out? How do you continue to grow your practice?

The time has come to take your practice to the next level and hire an acupuncture assistant. This assistant not only answers the phone, greets patients and accepts their payments, but they can set up the patient in the treatment room, take vital signs, record complaints, and allow you to focus on the treatment of patients. An assistant checks on patients to ensure their comfort, prepares herbal formulas, pulls needles; applies *gua sha*, cupping, or moxibustion; handles the front desk checkout, engages in marketing, and even files insurance claims. Instead of trying to do everything by yourself, you can pay a trained and fully capable acupuncture assistant to perform those tasks not directly involved in patient diagnosis and acupuncture treatments.

The establishment of the acupuncture assistant title is not without precedent. Physician assistants have been fully integrated into American healthcare since the 1970s. In most situations, patients do not question the role of a physician assistant in performing routine care and prescribing medications. Clearly, the need for trained practitioners to perform limited, routine patient care has necessitated the emergence of this medical occupation.

Similarly, chiropractic assistants have become commonplace in chiropractic clinics. They perform specific tasks under the direction of chiropractors. Chiropractic assistants have been around for decades.

Today, the Acupuncture and Traditional Chinese Medicine profession has matured to the point where assistants are now a necessity. Licensed acupuncturists who are successful in their clinics seldom continue to operate as sole practitioners. These health professionals have discovered that it is challenging, if not impossible, to perform all of the tasks required of their practice while still charging a reasonable rate and meeting revenue targets. With appropriate training, an assistant is often the answer.

The state of Massachusetts has rules defining acupuncture assistants. The scope is outlined in the following:

"An assistant shall not do any of the following procedures involving patients: diagnosis, point location, needle insertion, manipulation, electrical stimulation, render advice to patients, or perform any other procedure requiring a similar degree of judgment or skill; An assistant may only do the following procedures involving patients: cupping, moxibustion, needle removal, *gua-sha*, and the massaging of points."¹

This rule includes training and registration requirements. Additionally, each supervising and

licensed acupuncturist is limited to no more than two acupuncture assistants.

It should be noted that very few states have regulations for acupuncture assistants. In fact, private clinics and some online schools have begun offering training for acupuncture assistants with varying hours of required training. This could impact the safety of our clinics, and by extension, the reputation of our industry.

When we consider that the degree standard for licensed acupuncturists has for many years been set at the master's level (and is soon to be the first professional doctoral level) that a bachelor's degree becomes the most reasonable minimum education level for the acupuncture assistant. The course content of this degree in Traditional Chinese Medicine should include fundamental theory, biomedical coursework, point location with therapies for applying non-needling techniques to those points, emergency protocols, medical office management, herbal recognition and dispensing, patient communications, and practical clinical training.

Texas Health and Science University, located in Austin, Texas, is offering such a degree program to complement its master's and doctoral level programs. When acupuncture assistants can be trained to work with acupuncturists, greater economies of scale can be achieved thereby enhancing the ability of acupuncturists to provide the necessary traditional Chinese medical treatments required by those people residing in our communities.

References

1. 243 CMR 5.01(2), 5.08, and 5.09(5).
www.mass.gov/eohhs/provider/licensing/occupational/acupuncture/laws-regulations-and-guidelines.html. Ibid.

SEPTEMBER 2013