



ACUPUNCTURE TECHNIQUES

Your Client Asked You to Do What? Exploring Scope of Practice

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Harold G.* came blustering into the group clinic, demanding to know why we didn't have shower facilities for clients. Oh, and after business trips to Japan and Thailand, he wanted "Li'l Asian gals to walk on my back and stretch me from here to there." It took time to convince Harold G. that ours was a group therapy practice, not a walk-in spa. He just didn't get it.

I've polled colleagues in acupuncture and ABT as we continue to educate members of the public on dizzying levels regarding scope of practice. Yes, we have all been asked to perform neck and back adjustments by clients who believe this is a standard part of our practice, after they experienced adjustments from bodyworkers and/or acupuncturists in other countries.

Austin-based acupuncturist Alighta Averbukh says clients have even asked her to perform "manual pelvic floor" work. She explains it is beyond her scope of practice and refers them to a physical therapist.

Bone Setting?

True, bone setting is part of Chinese medicine. The Japanese equivalent (judo therapy) is part of martial-arts *dojo* training in Japan. But not in the U.S., where such techniques belong squarely within orthopedics or chiropractic.

Indeed, the chiropractic board in Texas went after a couple of licensed acupuncturists some years ago who insisted adjustments were a "traditional part of *tuina*." Until Texas Attorney General (now Senator) John Cornyn came out forcefully and stated *tuina* was *not* part of Acupuncture.¹

Acupuncturists who also practice *tuina* need to apply to become AOBTA certified to practice legally in Texas. (By the way, no other state singles out *tuina* in this way.)

The case was tested a few years ago when a freshly graduated acupuncturist advertised her *tuina* services, but forgot to mention she was also AOBTA certified. The state acupuncture board threatened to cancel her license until I involved a pro bono lawyer for her and supplied the board with AOBTA information supporting her legal right to practice *tuina*.

It was a tough time for us all but I'm happy to say she won her case. I elaborated on this in a [previous column](#) (July 2019).²

Blurry Lines Between Massage and Asian Bodywork

In spite of detailed and separate U.S. Department of Education³ definitions for massage (#51.3501) and Asian bodywork therapy (#51.3502), we continue to battle both public and legislative misrepresentations and misunderstandings.² Many of us have appeared countless times at committee meetings at our respective state capitols to argue and demonstrate these differences.

Nini Melvin, owner of *shiatsu* and healing arts school Meridians - Pathways to the Heart in Northampton Mass., and author of recently published *HUMANATURE*, is very clear in her website and promotional material when it comes to *shiatsu*. Clients will be fully clad and are advised to wear loose, comfy clothing. But somehow, she still gets clients expecting oils and rubdowns.

Two well-known celebrities were offensive to her in different ways. One, a member of a famous British pop group, thought he was entitled to grab her breast during the session. The other, a high-profile wife of a former state governor, kept grumbling, "This isn't what *my* practitioner does." Nini and I agreed that there was no end to our ongoing quest to educate and inform, even after our four decades in the field.

A problem we all face is the licensed massage therapist (LMT) who has completed, say, a brief course in *shiatsu* or Thai or *tuina*, and claims to "do *shiatsu*" or "do Thai" or "do *tuina*"; as opposed to saying they "integrate certain ABT techniques" into their practice and explaining what this means.

Gua Sha, Anyone?

I watched AOMA graduates perform and explain *gua sha* at the end of a sensitive session involving the NADA protocol followed by *tuina* during the stress-busting episodes we initiated for ICU and ER crews at St. David's North Austin Medical Center during the COVID crisis. This was a unique combo experience for many of the RNs and they loved it.

By contrast, a former student of mine, Robbie K.,* currently enrolled in a DAOM program, was concerned during the months he spent working as an LMT (prior to completing his LAc), when he was asked to perform *gua sha*, a technique in which he had not been trained.

The massage group he worked for, with franchisees throughout the U.S., advertises *gua sha* services in glowing terms on its website, without listing qualified practitioners. Robbie refused to perform *gua sha* and told his manager it was beyond his scope of practice. I contacted the group to ask what training hours it requires of its therapists. I still await a response.

Gua Sha Training?

Tuina and acupuncture expert Jamie Wu, LAc, PhD, and vice president of AOMA, who is also a former NCCAOM commissioner, says of *gua sha*: "I would recommend 18 hours didactic hands-on training, and another 18 hours clinical practice," within the context of a full training in Chinese

medicine.

I contacted Les Sweeney, president / CEO of Associated Bodywork and Massage Professionals (ABMP), to ask if *gua sha* is covered by its insurance policies. "Coverage issues are always a bit thorny," he admitted, adding that ABMP policies would cover *gua sha* depending on the state's recognition of it and the member's training. "The therapist not having training would be a red flag," he added.

I then ran Robbie K's concerns by local and national colleagues. The head of the massage board in Texas said it wasn't a matter for the board to investigate.

But AOBTA President Sarah Goldenburg expressed concern about "reckless practitioners" and ethical considerations regarding "overreach within an array of bodywork professions." She added that it was up to the ethics committee of the AOBTA and other relevant organizations to investigate formal complaints.

AOBTA board member Cari Johnson Pelava, founder of CenterPoint Massage & Shiatsu School and Clinic of Minneapolis, Minn., said, "Every year there is a new violation of professional boundaries. It's driven by employers, not by the schools."

Bottom line? It's those of us in Asian medicine who seem most aware of the possible misuse of one-off CEU techniques plucked out of context from the mosaic of our extensive training in ABT, acupuncture or both.

Acutely aware of how *gua sha* was included within his own extensive training, AOBTA Legislative Director Victor Manuel, LAc, DAOM, threw the topic into a general discussion at a recent meeting of the JGRC (Joint Government Relations Committee) of the Federation of Massage, Bodywork and Somatic Practices Organizations. The response from some of the 11 member organizations? *Gua sha* is used widely, even by beauticians for facial rejuvenation, and by chiropractors under the name "Graston Technique."

As *gua sha* isn't a registered name, the spokesperson for the AMTA said the technique could classify as a "mechanically assisted massage tool." Ouch.

Finally, a sobering comment about *gua sha* from Cherie Sohnen-Moe, co-author with Ben Benjamin, PhD of *The Ethics of Touch*, and a former instructor and member of the advisory board of ASAOM in Tucson Ariz.: "I don't think that the issue necessarily involves scope of practice, but more standards of practice and core ethics. The bigger issue is, are you properly trained?"

Editor's Note: Some names (identified with * in the text) and locations used in this article have been changed from their originals to protect client privacy.

References

1. "Texas Attorney General Says *Tuina* Is Not a Part of Acupuncture." *Acupuncture Today*, August 2001.
2. Ferguson PE. "Where Did You Say You Trained? The Importance of Verifying Credentials." *Acupuncture Today*, July 2019.
3. *Classification of Instructional Programs: 2000 Edition*. National Center for Education Statistics, April 2002.

