

Acupuncture Guild Update

Editorial Staff

In June 2000, representatives from more than two dozen acupuncture associations agreed to band together to form the National Guild for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine (NGAOM). Led by Ted Priebe, a licensed acupuncturist and Oriental medical doctor from Torrance, California, the Guild has grown substantially over time, promoting the interests of acupuncture and Oriental medicine by raising awareness and demonstrating the profession's benefits to health care providers, insurers and the public.

The Guild's status received a significant boost in October 2000, when the Office and Professional Employees International Union, a subsidiary of the AFL-CIO, accepted the Guild's bylaws and presented the NGAOM with a Guild charter. In just over 18 months, the Guild has become a political force in the profession, with its leaders providing testimony before the White House Commission on Complementary and Alternative Medicine Policy and developing relationships with lawmakers and other advocates of Asian healing.

Recently, *Acupuncture Today* spoke with Dr. Priebe for an update on the Guild's progress. In the following interview, Dr. Priebe discusses the advancements the Guild has made since its inception, and provides some insight into how the Guild's efforts in California will affect the practice of acupuncture and Oriental medicine throughout the country.

Acupuncture Today (AT): It's been just over a year since the National Guild was formed. For those who haven't heard of the Guild before, could you tell us a little bit about it and its affiliation with the AFL-CIO?

Ted Priebe (TP): The NGAOM is a professional guild for practitioners of acupuncture and Oriental medicine organized under the auspices of the Office and Professional Employees International Union (OPEIU) of the AFL-CIO. As an umbrella organization for the profession, our goals are to provide a national focus that promotes health and well-being through the utilization of acupuncture and Oriental medicine, and to advance, protect and preserve the profession.

Oriental medicine is a physiologically-based primary health care approach that historically (3,000 years or more) has been a major part of world medicine. It utilizes a comprehensive medical model that is internally consistent with specific strategies for dealing with a wide extent of illnesses and health dysfunction. One critical goal of the NGAOM is to promote the best understanding of Oriental/Chinese physiology in order to establish a baseline for clinical practice and rational research, and also to provide a starting point from which more study can be continued.

The OPEIU provides a vehicle for professionals and labor to work together for common goals and yet provide autonomy, as well as access to local, state and federal legislators, regulators and organizations.

AT: How does this arrangement differ from what other state and national organizations are doing for the profession?

TP: After 26 years, we are still a very small profession and have, for many reasons, been unable to develop and build an infrastructure that addresses and supports the legal and legislative needs to perpetuate the integration of Chinese medicine into the U.S. health care system. We recognized the tremendous value in joining a large world recognized organization such as the OPEIU, AFL-CIO would bring to our profession, in being able to have access to, and utilize, the assets and relationships this 45 million member organization has developed over the past 100 years.

AT: How does this relationship work? Could you give us an example?

TP: The Guild was recently invited and introduced by a representative of the U.S. Department of Labor to the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) concerning insurance benefits for federal and postal workers. Representatives from the federal unions were also in attendance. We discussed many issues regarding reimbursement for services performed by licensed acupuncturists and are developing strategies with the help of the OPEIU's legal council and lobbyist. We also were invited to testify before the White House Commission on Complementary and Alternative Medicine.

AT: This appears to be a significant advancement for acupuncture and Oriental medicine. What does the profession have to do to support this effort?

TP: Like any guild, union or professional association, membership and participation are critical to success. Cooperation between all associations is also important. We are all in the same profession, and we feel that having the opportunity to work with the AFL-CIO on the many issues we have is of tremendous benefit to licensed acupuncturists and health care consumers alike.

AT: What does the Guild see as barriers to reimbursement for acupuncture services? How are you working to get insurance companies to pay for acupuncture?

TP: As you may know, a lot of insurance companies will pay MDs, DCs, RNs and even PTs for acupuncture treatment, but not LACs, depending on the licensing and insurance laws in the state you practice. Federal programs are more difficult because they cover a broader area involving multiple states or regions and, as in the case of Medicare, the entire nation. We have made excellent progress in California because LACs are primary care providers and work as such in many areas such as workers' compensation programs, hospitals and interdisciplinary practices.

Political, organizational and individual relationships are by far the most pressing issue, which we are addressing as part of the OPEIU-AFL/CIO. It is our position that the public is best served by practitioners trained in Oriental medical theory and application. Important to this task is to: explain the Oriental/Chinese information using universally accepted anatomical and physiological terms; render service as primary health care providers; render a diagnosis consistent with Western biomedical understanding; have the ability to utilize Oriental medical modalities; be knowledgeable as to when Western treatment is either necessary or more effective for the patient's condition; and possess the ability to communicate effectively with all other medical professionals. The Guild is currently working with the California Acupuncture Board and the Education Task Force in identifying deficiencies in the educational competencies and establishing educational standards to meet our primary care responsibility.

The National Board of Acupuncture Orthopedics has joined with us to provide peer review and is working with us in developing standards of care in orthopedics, pain management and all other specialties in Chinese medicine. NBAO has a 14 year history in providing this service. Its educational programs are accredited in part by the California Industrial Medical Council and qualify for up to 300 hours of continuing education.

We are also working with Acu-Care to provide credentialing and an independent provider association (IPA) for our members. The guild is in a unique position with the ability to join labor councils, which are made up of local unions. Developing these relationships will allow us to develop health benefits for union members at the local, county, state and federal levels.

We most recently joined with the Natural Health Union-ITPEU-AFL-CIO, adding our membership (at no cost this year) to the Look for the Union Doctor/∫ program, which markets you and your practice directly to union members in your area. Our education and research committee is providing insurance companies with information on appropriate procedure and treatment guidelines that are consistent with Chinese medicine and legally defensible.

AT: Much of the work you've done appears to be taking place in California. How will this affect the rest of the profession on a national basis?

TP: We started in California and are doing a lot here because most of the profession and schools are in California. However, we have members across the country ready to develop new and better laws and regulations and increased educational requirements to better serve the public welfare. California is a unique place in the developing history of Chinese medicine. We are seeing the early stages of truly integrating Chinese medicine into the health care delivery system, which will set an example and standard for clinical practice and further research for the rest of the country. We have also established a seat, by invitation on the California Senate Committee, on reflex sympathetic dystrophy.

AT: Who is eligible to join the Guild, and where can practitioners find more information?

TP: Anyone can join the Guild. Annual dues are \$120.00 a year at this time for students, practitioners and associate members. You may join online at www.opei.org. You can also contact me by phone at (310) 325-8054, or by e-mail at needledrs@msn.com.

AT: Thank you, Dr. Priebe.

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