

## OM School Puts Public Health in Action

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Seattle Institute of Oriental Medicine (SIOM) is launching a new master of acupuncture degree (M.Ac.) in Spring 2012. The innovative program is designed to cultivate acupuncturists who can work in a variety of public health clinical settings as varied as rural health centers, private clinics, detox clinics, or international volunteer clinics in settings like northern Nepal. By emphasizing skills in bodywork, exercise, diet and acupuncture, the program seeks to train practitioners to provide treatment and self-care education to patients. The program also goes to the roots of this ancient medicine by having a significant amount of the instruction done in weekend intensives at a forest retreat setting on Vashon Island, Wash.

We spoke with Paul Karsten, M.Ed., E.A.M.P., co-founder of SIOM and its current president. He told us that three major influences helped to shape the new program. In particular, he described an educational philosophy that favored "... immersion learning in a natural setting" that would reflect the importance of the physical world and environment. Just as Five Phase theories are based in the change of time and the seasons, SIOM recognized that utilizing a natural setting might lend itself to a deeper understanding and awareness of the role of the environment on health, giving students the "feel of the seasons." Integrated into the training process will be instruction in meditation, *qi gong*, and other hands-on exercises.

SIOM's leadership believes that much of the energetic aspect of acupuncture practice could be more effectively learned in a natural retreat setting. Therefore, the school acquired a classroom setting on Vashon Island to provide weekend instruction with a daily schedule that emphasizes the dynamic relationship of the body and nature. This is coupled with instruction at SIOM's Seattle campus and at the Seattle teaching clinic and several externship sites in the Seattle area. These externships provide students the opportunity to work with a wide range of patient conditions and populations.

Karsten also described the ongoing and growing need for more acupuncture practitioners to work in areas of the U.S. and around the world where there is either little access to health care or the cost of health care is prohibitive. To date, several of SIOM's graduates have already gone out to volunteer and practice in settings where health services are limited. They report back about the large number of people seeking care and the unique set of skills required by the acupuncture practitioner. These include the capacity to treat a relatively large number of people in a group setting; knowledge of treatment approaches for serious health conditions facing people; ability to understand cross cultural issues; and the basics of healthy nutrition and emergency medical techniques that are applicable to parts of the world facing famine or other disasters. Because these topics are usually not covered in-depth in current degree programs in acupuncture, Karsten and his colleagues felt that a successful and effective training program would "promote access to global healing." These characteristics became key elements in the design of the academic and clinical experiences of the new SIOM M.Ac. program.

Terry Courtney, M.P.H., L.Ac., past dean of the School of Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine at Bastyr University, heartily agrees. "The new SIOM M.Ac. program provides a tremendous opportunity for those interested in combining public health with Chinese medicine studies. This innovative curriculum will provide graduates with the skill-sets needed to be successful practitioners in both US public health and international settings."

The new program also emphasizes that public health is based on equity, not charity. Collaboration with healthcare specialists, both nationally and internationally, contributes to better health outcomes and enhanced well-being for both individuals and their communities. Karsten described how the M.Ac. training contributes to empowering patients to incorporate "good nutritional practices, healthy lifestyle, and even learn organic gardening techniques."

Current national economics play a role in SIOM's third motivating reason for designing this program. One of the biggest challenges facing incoming students at this time is the rising cost of graduate education. For those taking out student loans, this leads to the responsibility for paying off a large debt that can compromise the new practitioner's ability to work in the low-income settings where acupuncture is needed the most. SIOM leadership decided to design a program that would retain high quality educational standards, but be able to function at a lower tuition cost, and also allow students to work at other jobs while going to school. This could reduce the need for large student loans with high interest payments. This program requires students to be self-motivated learners, but in the end this should create competent practitioners with the skills to adapt to the community health needs they face - without being limited in what they want to do by a significant student loan repayment.

#### Program Details

SIOM has an eclectic and comprehensive approach to training. Since first receiving 'candidate status' from the Accreditation Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine in 1996, students have been instructed in a variety of styles of East Asian medicine. SIOM's diverse faculty provided expertise on Five Element acupuncture, zhang fu, eight extra channels as well as six channel perspectives, meridian therapy, French and Chinese auriculotherapy, and scalp acupuncture. Students are taught palpation techniques to identify disharmony or stagnation, assess point location, and to determine the effectiveness of treatment. The variety of palpatory assessments originate from energy medicine practices in China, Japan, Taiwan, France, as well as methods developed through osteopathic practice.

During the weekend intensive trainings, classes begin on Friday at 3 pm. Students review material from the previous intensive session and engage in discussion on cases from clinical observation or internship. Following these discussions, an evening session of *qi gong* is held. Saturday classes begin with *qi gong* and include ongoing instruction in acupuncture points and technique. The therapeutics of food and nutrition are addressed at each meal, where students experience practical application of food therapy instruction. Afternoon classes are devoted to diagnostic strategies and assessment techniques. Group discussion of required readings occurs on Saturday evening, followed again by *qi gong* practice. On Sundays, students' day begins with *qi gong* and segues to instruction on points and techniques. Afternoon sessions include diagnostic training, clinical preceptorship and case discussion and end by 6 pm. Students are also exposed to extensive bodywork training at SIOM, including Chinese tuina and Japanese shiatsu instruction.

Ultimately, the goal of this program is to take another step towards making acupuncture services accessible. As a relatively inexpensive therapy with relatively few side effects, acupuncture can

provide a form of health care that promotes wellness, prevents disease, and eases suffering. In summary, an ideal example of public health in action. For more information on this M.Ac. program, go to [www.siom.edu](http://www.siom.edu).

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