

B.C. Health to cover acupuncture

Treatments will be an option for low-income people

Larry Pynn, Vancouver Sun

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Low-income British Columbians will soon have the option of seeing a registered acupuncturist under changes to the Medical Services Plan premium-assistance program.

A total of 930,000 British Columbians living in households earning \$28,000 or less a year, including welfare recipients, students, the disabled, and seniors, are covered by the program.

"It's definitively a milestone," Chris Vallee, immediate past president of B.C.'s Qualified Acupuncturist and Traditional Chinese Medicine Association, said in an interview Friday. "We're more accepted, part of the medical system. Our medicine is proven and more recognized."

He said it's also an important advancement in recognizing the importance of more natural medicines as alternatives to pharmaceuticals in the treatment of ailments.

Premium-assistance patients are currently permitted a total of 10 visits per year to a massage therapist, chiropractor, or physiotherapist, Vallee said, noting Health Minister George Abbott is expected to confirm next week the decision to give such patients access to acupuncture as a fourth option.

(Individuals in households earning more than \$28,000 must pay for acupuncture treatment out of their own pocket or through an extended health plan.)

The minister's office confirmed Abbott would make an announcement on the subject Tuesday at the S.U.C.C.E.S.S. office on West Pender in Vancouver.

"I have a lot of people come in and say, 'I wish I could afford the treatment, but can't,'" said Vallee, who operates clinics in Coquitlam and Abbotsford. "It's going to be a good option for people."

Acupuncturists have sought the change for years. As recently as last May, Vallee and Michael Chung, a member of the board of the College of Traditional Chinese Medicine Practitioners and Acupuncturists of B.C., met with the Liberal caucus in Victoria. Based on discussions in those meetings, Vallee believes the government sees benefit in using acupuncture as an alternative treatment for drug addicts.

He added one benefit of acupuncture is "you can treat the whole body rather than just specific areas."

The college is an official professional licensing authority established in 1996 to regulate the practice of traditional Chinese medicine and acupuncture.

Effective 2003, a valid registration (professional licence) issued by the college

is required in order to practise.

There are about 1,200 registered acupuncturists in the province.

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