January 16, 2014

To Whom It May Concern:

The American Association for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine (AAAOM), the national professional organization representing acupuncture and Oriental medicine (AOM) professionals in the United States, offers this information in response to the misinformation being distributed by LiveScience.com staff editor Bahar Gholipour, published Tuesday, January 14th, 2014. Gholipour reported on a New England Journal of Medicine clinical image report, which shows the traditional Asian medical practice of inserting gold threads subcutaneously in the treatment of osteoarthritis.

Gholipour states: “...little evidence supports the idea that treating medical conditions with acupuncture actually works” and references an earlier conflicting LiveScience.com article by Staff Writer Rachael Rettner of MyHealthNewsDaily, who concludes “the findings suggest that overall, acupuncture is effective, and is a reasonable treatment option for patients with chronic pain.” We hope the information presented below will serve to educate Gholipour and the public about the facts, scientific evidence, and current status of the AOM profession. These sources include widely available, credible information that refute the baseless and misleading statements being published online.

Acupuncture is Safe When Practiced by a Licensed Acupuncturist

Acupuncture has an unparalleled safety record with minimal risk of side effects. To further validate its safety, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) states: “There have been few complications (from acupuncture treatments) reported to date. The problems reported were typically caused by poorly trained and unlicensed providers of acupuncture using needles that are not sterile. It is important to seek treatment from a qualified acupuncturist practitioner who uses disposable (single-use) needles for each patient and is licensed to perform acupuncture.”

Well-respected medical schools, such as Georgetown, Johns Hopkins and Harvard, as well as many reputable hospitals and clinics, use acupuncture. The utilization of acupuncture by these esteemed institutions further demonstrates the solidity of the scientific evidence related to its effectiveness. A basic search of the term “acupuncture” in the NIH National Library of Medicine (PubMed) database reveals over 20,000 peer-reviewed journal articles.

“Real” Acupuncture is Superior to Sham Acupuncture

As referenced by Gholipour, a recent meta-analysis published in the Archives of Internal Medicine that examined four chronic pain conditions (back pain, osteoarthritis, headache, and
shoulder pain) provides the strongest evidence to date that “real” acupuncture is superior to sham acupuncture. In this analysis of 29 randomized controlled trials, the specific effect of needling at true acupuncture points was consistently statistically superior to sham acupuncture. A large sample size (over 17,000) was a particular strength of this study, suggesting the findings were not likely due to study bias or sample size issues. Moreover, the effect size of “real” acupuncture, when compared to other interventions, such as usual or ancillary care, was also significant. Together these data strongly suggest that “real” acupuncture can be a beneficial option for patients suffering from chronic pain.

**Acupuncture is Medically Effective**

As enumerated by the NIH, the World Health Organization and others, acupuncture is a cost-effective, low-tech, and minimally-invasive system of care that has been found to be highly effective in the treatment of commonly occurring medical conditions. It has demonstrated significant effects on the central and peripheral nervous systems, immune system functioning, and modulation of the stress response. Acupuncture elicits consistent and meaningful improvement outcomes across a diverse set of conditions. High quality research continues to emerge on acupuncture treatments for carpal tunnel syndrome, hip or knee pain, infertility, impotence, lower back pain, nausea and vomiting after chemotherapy and/or an operation, neck pain, rheumatoid arthritis, shoulder pain, tennis elbow, smoking cessation and stroke among other conditions.

**Treatment Through Insertion of Semi-Permanent Subcutaneous and Permanent Percutaneous Metal Threads or Needles**

It is important to note that leaving acupuncture needles permanently in the body as a form of treatment is not a generally accepted practice by acupuncturists in the United States. However, many healthcare providers, including physicians and acupuncturists, use types of electroanalgesia such as percutaneous electrical nerve stimulation (PENS) whereby needles are temporarily or permanently placed in the body and connected to a device that stimulates them with electricity for pain management. Gholipour’s article fails to mention PENS or its efficacy, and instead only provides misinformation on this traditional Asian medical practice.

**Acupuncture Education and Training**

As outlined above, acupuncture’s safety is rooted in how it is applied by licensed practitioners. In the United States, training of acupuncturists is regulated according to individual state law. Currently, more than 43 states and the District of Columbia have such laws in place. The National Certification Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine (NCCAOM) offers national certification examinations for AOM practitioners, which are required by almost all of the aforementioned states. As requirements vary from state to state, each state’s board of acupuncture can best provide information about its specific qualifications and standards.

Acupuncture professionals are trained in more than 60 accredited institutions in the U.S., whose accredditor is recognized by the U.S. Department of Education. Many offer master’s level programs and are accredited by or have been granted candidacy status by the Accreditation...
Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine (ACAOM). ACAOM standards for a master's level degree in acupuncture require a 3-year program (approximately 3,000 hours of study) and a 4-year program for a degree in Oriental medicine, which includes both acupuncture and herbal therapy. Some schools have begun to offer doctorate level programs, which include significant additional didactic and clinical doctoral training.

In closing, the information above documents acupuncture as a standardized, licensed, and regulated health care profession that conducts training in accredited institutions and provides safe, cost-effective, and comparatively effective evidence-based medical services. The AAAOM and our sister organizations stand in support of utilizing acupuncture effectively and appropriately. Please do not hesitate to contact the AAAOM for additional information on research, training, certification, state licensure, or the efficacy of acupuncture treatments.

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4 Correspondence with the American Acupuncture Council, October 20, 2010.