



Council of Colleges of
Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine

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Position Paper on Dry Needling

It is the position of the Council of Colleges of Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine (CCAOM) that dry needling is an acupuncture technique.

Rationale

A recent trend in the expansion in the scopes of practice of western trained health professionals to include “dry needling” has resulted in redefining acupuncture and re-framing acupuncture techniques in western biomedical language. Advancement and integration of medical technique across professions is a recognized progression. However, the aspirations of one profession should not be used to redefine another established profession.

In addition proponents of “dry needling” by non-acupuncture professionals are attempting to expand trigger point dry needling to any systemic treatment using acupuncture needles and whole body treatment that includes dry needling by using western anatomical nomenclature to describe these techniques. It is the position of the CCAOM that these treatment techniques are the *de facto* practice of acupuncture, not just the adoption of a technique of treatment.

Terminology

The invasive procedure of dry needling has been used synonymously with the following terms:

Trigger Point Dry Needling

Manual Trigger Point Therapy, when using dry needling

Intramuscular Dry Needling

Intramuscular Manual Therapy, when using dry needling

Intramuscular Stimulation, when using dry needling

History

The system of medicine derived from China has a centuries-long continuous distinct practice with an extensive literature over 2000 years old. After President Nixon’s visit to China in the early 1970s, public interest in and demand for

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acupuncture resulted in the establishment of first-professional degrees in acupuncture in the United States. Today over 50 accredited¹ first-professional colleges teach a diversity of styles of health care utilizing acupuncture, Chinese herbology, manual techniques such as tuina (Chinese therapeutic massage), nutrition, and exercise/breathing therapy. Individuals who attain this degree undergo a rigorous training program at a minimum standard of three academic years that contains 450 hours in biomedical science (biology, anatomy, physiology, western pathology, and pharmacology), 90 hours in patient counseling and practice management, and 1365 hours in acupuncture. Of the 1365 hours in acupuncture, 660 hours must be clinical hours.

Acupuncture is a system of medicine that utilizes needles to achieve therapeutic effect. The language used to describe and understand this effect is not limited and is articulated in both traditional and modern scientific terms. The National Institutes of Health has recognized the efficacy of acupuncture in its consensus statement of 1997² and continued funding of research. It is clear that other professions such as physical therapy and others also recognize the efficacy of acupuncture and its various representations such as dry needling due to the fact that they are attempting to use acupuncture and rename it as a physical therapy technique.

Dry needling is an acupuncture technique

As a system of treatment for pain, acupuncture relies on a category of points derived from the Chinese language as “*ashi*” (阿是) points. “*Ashi*” point theory describes the same physiological phenomenon identified as “trigger points,” a phrase coined by Dr Janet Travell³ and dates to the Tang Dynasty (618-907). While Dr. Travell coined the phrase “trigger point”, the physiological phenomenon has been long known to acupuncturists. Dr. Travell herself had contact with acupuncturists and chiropractors interested in acupuncture in the Los Angeles area in the 1980s. Dr. Mark Seem, author of *A New American Acupuncture*⁴, discussed the similarity of their techniques in the 1990s.⁵

Modern contributors from the field of acupuncture in the specialization of dry needling techniques are:

Dr. Mark Seem, Ph. D., L. Ac., published the textbook *A New American Acupuncture* covering the topic of dry needling in 1993. His books have been published for over two decades.

Matt Callison, L. Ac., is the founder of the Sports Medicine Acupuncture® certification program and the author of *Motor Points Index*. The continuing education certification program is available to licensed acupuncturists through a private seminar company and through postgraduate studies at the New England School of Acupuncture.

Whitfield Reaves, L. Ac. is the author of *The Acupuncture Handbook of Sports Injuries and Pain: A Four Step Approach to Treatment*. He also offers a

postgraduate continuing education program in Sports Acupuncture only for licensed acupuncturists.

From the above sources it is apparent that acupuncture has an established history of using treatment utilizing what are now labeled trigger points.

Documented practice of “dry needling” by acupuncturists

The National Commission for the Certification of Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine (NCCAOM), the certifying board for acupuncture, completed a job task analysis in 2003 and again in 2008. The analysis documented the prevalence of actual use of dry needling techniques, i.e. the treatment of trigger points or motor points with acupuncture needles, by practicing acupuncturists. In 2003, 82% of acupuncturists surveyed used needling of trigger points in patients that presented with pain. Of the patients that present for acupuncture treatment, it is estimated that 56% present with trigger point pain. The others present for non-pain conditions such as non-trigger point pain, digestive disorders, infertility and many other conditions. The other 18% of acupuncturists used acupuncture needling techniques in non-trigger point locations. These findings document that acupuncturists are well trained to use and have consistent historical usage of trigger and motor point “dry needling” treatment. Dry needling represents a substantial daily practice among American acupuncturists.

History of “dry needling” in North America

Dr. Chan Gunn, M.D., is the founder of dry needling in Canada. He wrote in 1976, “As a first step toward acceptance of acupuncture by the medical profession, it is suggested that a new system of acupuncture locus nomenclature be introduced, relating them to known neural structures.”⁶ One may reasonably infer from this statement that Dr. Gunn believed that in order for acupuncture to be accepted in Western medicine, the technique would need to be redefined. Using a different name for the same technique does not rise to the level of creating a new technique. Dr. Chan Gunn’s dry needling seminars are only four days in length.

Jan Dommerholt has published extensively on the technique and teaches dry needling to both western trained health professionals and licensed acupuncturists, but his teaching has been focused on the profession of Physical Therapy (PT). He argues that dry needling is a new emerging western technique described in western scientific terms. He is also attempting to redefine acupuncture based solely on eastern esoteric concepts.

A current author and provider of dry needling courses, Yun-tao Ma, Ph.D., extends dry needling beyond trigger points to include acupuncture points. He describes the points according to the neuroanatomical location and effects and calls them “Acu reflex” points. It is this adaptation and renaming of acupuncture to provide total body treatment that poses the greatest risk to the public, as it circumvents established standards for identical practice, i.e., acupuncture, without the rigorous training of acupuncture and the licensing of such.

It is the position of the CCAOM that any intervention utilizing dry needling is the practice of acupuncture, regardless of the language utilized in describing the technique.

State Board of Medicine complaints against acupuncturists for dry needling

In 2009, a physical therapist submitted a complaint to the Maryland Board of Acupuncture concerning the use of the term dry needling in chart notes by an acupuncturist. The Maryland Board of Acupuncture correctly dismissed the complaint because the procedure was done by a licensed acupuncturist trained in the use of dry needling, *i.e.*, acupuncture.

In filing the complaint, the physical therapist was not asserting that the acupuncturist caused any harm or potential of harm to the patient. Rather, the physical therapist asserted that the acupuncturist used proprietary language that was unique to physical therapy, when in fact the acupuncturist was using language that was common across professions. The Little Hoover Commission, in its 2004 report to the California legislature concluded, “interactions with other health care providers, including collaboration and referrals, as well as with many members of the public, benefit from the use of common, Western-based diagnostic terminology”⁷

Summary Position of the CCAOM on Dry Needling

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¹ The Accreditation Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine (ACAOM) is recognized by the U.S. Department of Education to accredit colleges of acupuncture and Oriental medicine and authorizes such colleges to confer Master’s level first-professional degrees.

² <http://consensus.nih.gov/1997/1997Acupuncture107html.htm>.

³ Travel, Janet G., and David G. Simons. Myofascial pain dysfunction: the trigger point manual. Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, 1983, Print.

⁴ Seem, Mark. *A new American acupuncture: acupuncture osteopathy, the myofascial release of the bodymind*. Blue Poppy Press, 1993. Print.

⁵ Private communication of October, 2007 with Whitfield Reaves, L. Ac., who attended study groups with Dr. Travell in the 1980s, and in a letter from Dr. Mark Seem to Jan Dommerholt November 11, 2007. Seem relates his invitation and demonstration of acupuncture “dry needling” techniques to Dr. Travell in New York City in the 1990s.

⁶ Gunn, CC, Ditchburn FG, King MH, Renwick GJ, *Acupuncture loci: a proposal for their classification according to their relationship to known neural structures*, *Am J Chin Med*, 1976 Summer; 4(2): 183-95.

⁷ Milton Marks “Little Hoover” commission on California State Government Organization and Economy by the UCSF Center for the Health Professions, *Acupuncture in California: Study of Scope of Practice*, May 2004, pg. 13.