

Who's Needling You?
By Joe Wollen L.Ac.

Disclaimer: This is an Article written by a Licensed Acupuncturist and may contain some Bias. However, I have tried to provide more facts than opinions, but because this relates to my Profession and Career I cannot guarantee a completely unbiased article. Any opinions in this paper are entirely my own and don't necessarily reflect any other L.Acs, P.T.s, M.D.s, DOs or any other professions.

I also apologize for the length of this article it was originally meant to be small, but I feel the more informed you are as an individual the better choices you can make.

It seems anymore you can't drive down a street without seeing someone promoting Acupuncture, but is all Acupuncture the same? How do you know the person doing the Acupuncture is "legit"? Is there a way to discern the level of training a person has with Acupuncture? I will seek to answer all these questions, enabling you to determine if Acupuncture is right for you and who may be best qualified to treat you.

Is all Acupuncture the same?

The short answer is yes, but as always there is not just one answer. Acupuncture is defined as;

"A method of relieving pain or curing illness by placing needles into a person's skin at particular points on the body. Originally Chinese Practice of inserting fine needles through the skin at specific points especially to cure disease or relieve pain." (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Acupuncture>)

So, the short of it is, any person that is putting needles into you is essentially doing Acupuncture. However, there are several defining characteristics that make Acupuncture unique.

- 1)** Acupuncture does **not** use Hypodermic Needles, they use a more modern solid Filiform needle. The needle sizes range from 30 gauge to 42 gauge, the sizes used vary mostly on Practitioner Preference. To give you an idea of these sizes a 30 gauge is **smaller** than what they use on New Borns. The 42 Gauge is about as thick as your own hair, literally a few thousandths of an inch thick. Most Practitioners tend to favor a "middle of the road gauge" at about 36 gauge.
- 2)** The depth of insertion is different from that of Western Hypodermic needles. Of course most Hypodermic needles are designed to be used for either injection or drawing of fluids. So most of the time these needles are inserted in veins or target areas of body, such as Corticosteroid shots, immunization shots , blood draws etc.

Acupuncture Needles however are **not** designed for this purpose and because of their thinness can reach where Hypodermic needles cannot. This can be both therapeutic or very dangerous depending on the skill and training of the Practitioner (something we will explore later). The depth of insertion for Acupuncture needles **commonly** varies per Practitioner based on numerous reasons; the individuals training, schooling, theories, treatment methods, sensitivity of the patient etc.

The depth of insertion can vary from very light, 1 mm depth of Japanese styles, to a deeper depth of several inches. Again this can be for numerous reasons, for example Acupuncturists may insert needles into Points into the buttocks for low back pain. This is obviously a thickly muscled area and the needle can easily penetrate several inches. However, Acupuncturists will also needle the hands, feet and head, places where there is far less density of tissue and thus the needle insertion does not need to be as deep.

Now as I mentioned earlier, there are many cautions to be considered by anyone inserting needles into the body (regardless of whether they are Hypodermic or Acupuncture needles). The **least** significant is that of local bruising, this can happen because a Practitioner can strike a vein (or a more serious case could be an artery if they are very negligent) causing a local bruise. This can happen easily when using larger needle gauges such as the 30 gauge, less so (generally) with smaller 36-42 gauges because they are so thin.

Some of the **most** significant injuries that can happen as a result from negligence of a Practitioner are; Hitting nerves, Hitting arteries, the most serious of all Piercing organs (Pneumothorax). If a nerve is struck generally it causes radiating pain and it can vary in intensity from extremely intense to a mild “sharp” sensation. Hitting an artery can cause a significant bruise (in the smallest case) to significant bleeding and blood loss. Piercing an organ can result in trauma to the organ, or in some cases, if not caught right away and treated (by a licensed Medical Doctor) can cause death.

Please, keep in mind here, I am not trying to dissuade you from Acupuncture. Quite the opposite (since I am a Licensed Acupuncturist), however, I want you all to be educated and know the seriousness of what could happen in the hands of **negligent** individuals. This leads us to our next question;

How do you know the person doing the Acupuncture is “legit”?

First off, it is important to know that Acupuncture is **one tool** in the repertoire of Asian Medicine Practitioners. There are other professions that are now presently starting to use Acupuncture; Chiropractors, Medical Doctors (M.D.s), Physical Therapists (P.T.s) in the form of “Dry Needling”, D.O.s etc.

When you see a **Licensed Acupuncturist** they may or may not always use Acupuncture to treat you. Why? It all depends on the diagnosis. There are times when Acupuncture is outright wrong for certain conditions and certain times of disease.

A **Licensed Acupuncturist** has received this training and knows how to operate from a thorough diagnosis to give you the best care they can. Now, based on the Hours other individuals have spent training in Acupuncture they may or may not receive thorough training on how to diagnose properly. With any Medicine if you don't have the proper diagnosis how can you properly treat people?

In Medicine, the amount of training always varies among individual Practitioners and Acupuncture is no exception. Generally, the amount of training a Practitioner receives to perform Acupuncture can and does vary State to State. For example, in Nebraska, legally Chiropractors and M.D.s don't have to have **any** prior training in Acupuncture to do Acupuncture.

Acupuncture, generally, is a very safe technique with minimal chances of harm to the patient. Yes, indeed above I did mention piercing organs and nerves can harm a patient, however, Chiropractors and M.D.s all have significant Anatomical training to hopefully avoid such injuries. The **only** exception to this is if the individual is being grossly negligent and doing Malpractice. Unfortunately, Malpractice and Negligence is a possibility for all individuals even for **Licensed Acupuncturists**.

The real concern is the fact that other professions **don't** have the same level of Training a Licensed Acupuncturist does. Why is this significant? There are several reasons;

- 1) There are Acupuncture points that are contraindicated in Pregnancy. These points can stimulate Uterine contractions and possibly cause premature birth.
- 2) There are points that are contraindicated in Headaches, digestive issues etc that can make the disease worse. If you don't work from a proper diagnosis you can make a patient's illness worse with improper treatment.
- 3) There are Acupuncture points that can increase Vasoconstriction (Closing of blood vessels) and Vasodilation (opening of blood vessels). This can be dangerous if you have High blood pressure for example and an inexperienced Practitioner chooses points that increase Vasoconstriction (Closing of blood vessels) thus **increasing** your blood pressure!
- 4) Other professions typically don't do **only** Acupuncture. When you see these other Practitioners you may be their only one for the day, week, last month or year. Generally, when you see a Licensed Acupuncturist this is **all** they do, day in, day out, they **know** the techniques, they **know** what to expect from treatments, they **know** how to properly treat you.
- 5) Lastly, Chiropractors, M.D.s, P.T.s are not required to maintain any CEUs/ PDAs (Continuing Education Units or Personal Development hours) in Acupuncture. Meaning they may or may not (it is solely up to the Practitioner) continue annual Training in Acupuncture. In Nebraska presently Licensed Acupuncturists are required to do 50 CEUs every 2 years to maintain their License.

Now that you are more educated in some of the possible "dangers" of Acupuncture I hope you can see the significance of being able to pick a "Legit" Practitioner. Fortunately like other professions before them Licensed Acupuncturists have a way to let you know you are receiving quality care from highly skilled and trained individuals in Asian Medicine.

Is there a way to discern the level of training a person has with Acupuncture?

Yes! Look and know all about "The alphabet soup" after a person's name. This will tell you the level of training a person has received in Acupuncture and Asian Medicine. Here it is important that I tell you I use **my own terminology** to **broadly** define a type of Medicine.

Asian Medicine Practitioner;

I personally choose to use the term “Asian Medicine” because in reality we are practicing a medicine that has developed over the last 3000 years through the **entire** continent of Asia. This includes, but is not limited to, Japan, China, Tibet, India, Korea, Philippines, etc. Throughout the Millennia different Countries developed their own unique styles of Asian Medicine and diagnosis, but most will use; Acupuncture, Herbs, Diet/Nutrition, Exercise and Massage in their repertoire of treatment techniques.

Different Asian Medicine Practitioners will find different techniques and teachers throughout the World, study with them and bring them to your front door. So it is virtually impossible to say which is which, which is better, which techniques are right, etc. Thus, the reason I choose to use the term “Asian Medicine.”

In the United States;

It is **Nationally required** that in order for an individual to say they are a **Licensed Acupuncturist** they have meet the following Criteria;

- 1) They have Graduated from a Nationally Accredited University with a **Master of Sciences degree** of Asian/Chinese Medicine. This is presently a **minimum of 2,850 hours** of training. This training ranges from; Chinese medicine, Acupuncture, Supervised Clinical hours, Pharmacology, Biology, Microbiology, Biochemistry, Anatomy Physiology, Herbology, Diagnosis and differentiation, Apprenticing under Licensed Practitioners, 750 supervised treatment hours and more.
- 2) Once Graduated the individual **must pass** a Nationally Accredited exam given by the NCCAOM (National Certification Commission of Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine) that has Three to four main parts;
 - 1) A comprehensive Acupuncture and Foundations of Chinese Medicine Exam
 - 2) A Biomedical Exam (Western Medicine exam) that includes HIPPA, OSHA, Needle Sterilization techniques, Biohazard disposal, When to refer to Medical Doctor etc.
 - 3) Foundations of Chinese Medicine and diagnostics exam
 - 4) Chinese Herbal Exam (Optional in most States).
- 3) Licensed Acupuncturists are required to have passed a CNT Exam (Clean Needle Technique).
- 4) For Nebraska, they require that an Individual Pass the above exams (the exception being the Chinese Herbal Exam) and The Practitioner has to have graduated from an Accredited Program.

In the United States there is are several “Alphabet soups” after a Practitioner’s name that may be used if they meet the above Criteria. Any individuals with the following letters after their names will have met the above Criteria. We will start with the most Common in use first;

- 1) L.Ac. = Licensed Acupuncturist
 - 1) This is by far the most common letters you **must** look for if you are seeking to be treated by the individuals who meet the above requirements.

- 2) M.S.T.C.M. = Master of Sciences in Traditional Chinese Medicine
 - 1) This will also be used to show an individual Practitioner's background and training. When you see this you will know this individual completed a program that includes; Acupuncture, Dietary/Nutrition, Chinese Massage, Chinese Diagnosis **and** Chinese Herbal Medicine. Not every Practitioner will use this though, L.Ac. is more frequent presently.
- 3) MS. Ac. = Master of Sciences in Acupuncture
 - 1) This is becoming a newer designation. These individuals will still be able to be L.Ac. They will and do meet the above requirements with ONE exception, they generally get NO Clinical Hours or extensive Chinese Herbal training. These individuals have chosen to focus primarily on all of the above **except** Chinese Herbs.
- 4) Ph.d.T.C.M. = Doctorate in Traditional Chinese Medicine
 - 1) Presently there are no National Standardizations for a Doctorate in TCM. However, this will more than likely be changing in the coming years as more Accredited Schools are offering Ph.D training. The additional Training can vary per school however this can include upwards of an additional 2000 hours of training in Traditional Chinese Medicine, usually with a specialty; Gynecology, Pediatrics, Cancer Therapies, Sports Medicine, etc.
- 5) O.M.D. = Oriental Medicine Doctor
 - 1) This was an older designation that is not used too much in practice anymore however, is just as reliable to know this Practitioner has **high levels** of education in Chinese Medical Fields.

By Comparison;

Anyone who says they do Acupuncture but **does not** have L.Ac. after their name has generally done the following;

- 1) A 100 hour to 300 hour set of courses.
 - 1) Some Practitioners say they have "Extensive Training in Acupuncture" with 100 hours. To put this "Extensive" training into perspective, most individuals work a 40 hour work week, so 2 weeks is 80 hours. This "Extensive" training is basically 2 full weeks of "Extensive" training. Most Jobs require longer than 2 weeks for an individual to train before they are hired on as full staff.
 - 2) The 300 hour program is a bit more respectable at 1.5 months of total training (using the above analogy), but still fails in comparison to an L.Acs **required** 750 hours of **supervised** Clinical Treatment hours. This means an L.Ac has received **at least** 2 x the amount of the 300 hour program, just in treatment hours. Treatment hours mean just that, actual treatment of people. So an L.Ac. by the time they have graduated have treated at least 750 people. This **does not** include all the additional hands on training of treating classmates, professors, etc. Most L.Acs have treated nearly 1000 people by the time they graduate a Masters Program.

- 3) **Most** of these 300 hour courses require **no supervised training**. Yes, that means these Practitioners will go and do a course, may practice what they learned for a few days, then come back and do it on you. They don't have Supervisors to consult with, they just "practice" on you.
- 2) Medical Doctor that does not need to have any training (or in Nebraska a Chiropractor with **no** training)
- 3) The Grey area of "Dry Needling" being done by P.T.s.

What is "Dry Needling?"

This can honestly be a "touchy" area for both L.Acs and P.T.s for many reasons. Most are beyond the scope of this article, I will try to dilute this down to the "bare bones" for you. "Dry Needling" is presently being defined as;

"Dry needling is a broad term used to differentiate "non-injection" needling from the practice of "injection needling" which utilises a hyperdermic syringe and usually involves the injection of an agent such as saline, local anaesthetic or corticosteroid into the tissue or specific anatomical structures .In contrast to this, dry needling utilises a solid, filament needle, as is used in the practice of Acupuncture, and relies on the stimulation of specific reactions in the target tissue for its therapeutic effect." Source: <http://www.dryneedling.com.au/what-is-dry-needling>

Perhaps now you can see why L.Acs are having a hard time with the term "Dry Needling." It sounds a lot like Acupuncture doesn't it? Especially if you remember the definition of Acupuncture;

"A method of relieving pain or curing illness by placing needles into a person's skin at particular points on the body. Originally Chinese Practice of inserting fine needles through the skin at specific points especially to cure disease or relieve pain." (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Acupuncture>)

A PT will typically tell you they call it "Dry Needling" because they are not inserting the needles into Acupuncture points, they are inserting them into Trigger Points (TrPs). However, Janet Travell M.D. (The originator of "Dry Needling") prints in her own book on the subject;

"Trigger points and Acupuncture. The distinction between TrPs and Acupuncture points for the relief of pain is blurred for a good number of reasons. First, the mechanisms responsible for the pain relief associated with the two concepts have until very recently been enigmatic or controversial. Second, as reported by Melzack, et al., there is a high degree of correspondence (71% based on their analysis) between published locations of TrPs and Classical Acupuncture points for the relief of pain. Third, a number of studies reports similar results when needling TrPs using Acupuncture needles as when using hypodermic needles injected with solution." (Travell, Simons, & Simons, 1999, pp. 41-42)

Janet Travell M.D. herself published that Melzack reported; “ *there is a high degree of correspondence (71% based on their analysis) between published locations of TrPs and Classical Acupuncture points for the relief of pain.*”(Travell, Simons, & Simons, 1999, pp. 41-42)

So, with 70% of their points being Acupuncture points, L.Ac’s feel that P.T.s are indeed doing Acupuncture. This may not seem like a “big deal” however, if we look at the above example of some Acupuncture points being shown to cause uterine contractions, this could cause a potentially serious case if used improperly on a pregnant woman. Presently these cautions are **not being taught** in typical “Dry Needling” programs. So P.T.s are completely unaware of what points may cause uterine contractions, may increase headaches, nausea, etc.

Closing;

I hope this article has given you more information about Acupuncture and the different training of Practitioners. To put it simply if you are seeking to add Acupuncture to your Healthcare plan it is important for **you** to do your **due diligence** in protecting and educating yourself. Whether you are seeing a L.Ac., M.D., Chiropractor, P.T., D.O. (the main professions doing Acupuncture), ask them questions.

I recommend for anyone to research, write down questions you have and take it in to your first appointment. This will eliminate you forgetting your questions and concerns and if you have a tangible piece of paper before you, hopefully, you will be more inclined to ask questions. If you go to your Practitioner and they are reluctant to answer your questions (regardless of what Profession it is), I would personally be skeptical of letting them treat me.

In my personal practice I sometimes fear that a person will get tired of me asking “Do you have any questions for me?” or “Is everything I said clear?”. **It is my personal opinion that if a Practitioner does not have time to answer your questions, how do they have time to properly diagnose and treat you?**

Again, no one will protect you but you, and in the words to paraphrase Henry Rollins “That which you don’t know about has power over you.” I hope this article has allowed you to “know” a bit more and thus give you the “power” to decide a proper Practitioner for you.