The use of acupuncture and attitudes to regulation among doctors in the UK – a survey

Julian Price, Adrian White

Abstract

Objective To assess the usage of acupuncture by members of British Medical Acupuncture Society (BMAS) in their daily work, in the course of a survey of attitudes to regulation of the acupuncture profession.

Methods A brief questionnaire survey of all members was conducted in December 2002.

Results After a single mailing, 1112 members responded (a response rate of 48%). Seventy-five percent of these were general practitioners. The majority were in support of a regulatory process. Ninety percent of respondents indicated that they use acupuncture in their practice, giving an average of about eight treatments per week. Sixty-one percent of these treatments are given within the National Health Service (NHS) at no cost to the patient.

Conclusion It is estimated that BMAS members provide a total of about one million acupuncture treatments each year, of which well over half a million are given within the NHS.

Keywords Acupuncture, regulation, attitude, use, survey.

Introduction

The British Medical Acupuncture Society (BMAS) is the leading professional body representing doctors who practise acupuncture in the UK, whether they work in general practice or as specialists, and within or outside the National Health Service (NHS). The Society has recently opened its membership to other health professionals, the main restriction being that they must be regulated by a statutory body such as the Nursing and Midwifery Council or Health Professions Council. The Society provides training courses at various levels, scientific meetings twice a year, a quarterly scientific journal, a biannual newsletter, and a website. The latter includes information for the public, as well as information and discussion sections for members.

In the UK, patients may sometimes gain access to acupuncture through the NHS, without charge, if they can find a healthcare professional who provides this service. This will usually be either a doctor, physiotherapist or nurse in primary care or in a hospital clinic. Patients may also gain access to acupuncture privately from a range of healthcare practitioners including doctors, physiotherapists and those trained in acupuncture alone.

The House of Lords Select Committee appointed to consider Science and Technology, in their report on Complementary and Alternative medicine, recently made a call for the regulation of acupuncture, and the BMAS has been involved in extensive negotiations on this topic with other professional organisations. In order to gauge the views of the Society’s members towards the regulation of acupuncture, a brief survey of their attitudes was conducted. Additional questions on members’ use of acupuncture were incorporated opportunistically into the questionnaire. This report focuses on the data on use of acupuncture.

Methods

A postal survey was sent to all members of the BMAS on 12th December 2002 to be returned by 6th January 2003. No reminders were sent. The development of the questionnaire was coordinated by the first author, and its main purpose was to ascertain members’ support for a regulatory body and to get feedback on some suggested levels for a registration fee.
Members were asked to tick a box corresponding to their employment (GP, hospital doctor or other health professional), to state whether they would support the establishment of a regulatory body and a single register for acupuncturists, whether they had attended the Foundation Course run by the BMAS (since other courses are available), and whether they currently treated patients with acupuncture. Following on from the latter question, assuming an answer in the affirmative, they were asked how many patients they treated per week with acupuncture (giving figures for NHS and private patients separately).

Results
All 2312 current members with a UK address were sent a questionnaire, and 1112 (48%) responded. The majority of respondents (56%) were in favour of some form of regulatory body for acupuncturists, but 27% were undecided. Of the 978 who completed the relevant section on payment of fees for a regulatory body, just over 33% were prepared to pay £10 - £20, and nearly 39% were prepared to pay up to £30. Some respondents added comments to indicate that they would see this payment included as part of their subscription and not an additional expense.

Among the GP respondents, 74% had undertaken the Society’s own Foundation Course, as had 58% of the hospital doctors and 62% of the other healthcare professionals. The number of treatments being provided by members each week is shown in Table 1. Overall, 90% of respondents provide acupuncture treatment, and 61% of these treatments are given free within the NHS. GPs give a higher percentage of NHS treatments (74%) than other staff. The average number of treatments given by all respondents is almost eight per week.

Discussion
A brief survey of members of the BMAS found that the majority of respondents support some form of regulatory body for acupuncturists, and that they give on average eight treatments per week, the majority of which are provided free within the NHS.

The proportions of survey respondents did not accurately reflect the categories of membership of the whole Society, which consists of 60% GPs, 28% hospital doctors and 13% other healthcare professionals. Adjusting the data to correct for this discrepancy, and extrapolating the figures from one week to the whole year, we estimate that overall 521 667 treatments were given by BMAS members within the NHS and a further 455 504 were provided to patients who paid for themselves or were funded by the health insurance agencies.

There are two main limitations to this study. The

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<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Responses to survey of 2312 BMAS members</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>GPs</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
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<tr>
<td>Respondents</td>
<td>831</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of BMAS membership</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondents providing acupuncture</td>
<td>769</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondents not providing acupuncture</td>
<td>57</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of NHS treatments per week</td>
<td>4331</td>
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<tr>
<td>Average number per member</td>
<td>5.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of private treatments per week</td>
<td>1513</td>
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<tr>
<td>Average number per member</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of treatments per week</td>
<td>5844</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average number per member</td>
<td>7.0</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

GPs – general practitioners
* – percentages add up to less than 100. Some respondents did not include data on provision of acupuncture
† – percentages add up to more than 100. Some respondents may have misinterpreted the question.
first is the response rate, which is lower than usually considered scientifically reliable, although reasonably high for a survey of healthcare professionals. The second is that the data on usage of acupuncture depend on recall and were not validated, for example by checking actual work records for the previous week. Given the nature of the survey, and the time constraints on the average healthcare professional, it was considered unreasonable to ask respondents to make a more accurate measurement of their use of acupuncture. We believe that it is unlikely that respondents would have introduced any systematic bias into the data, since the main focus of the questionnaire was on their attitude to professional regulation and they had no reason to believe that their responses on use of acupuncture would be published.

The majority of members of the BMAS are general practitioners. A previous survey of GPs in the UK found that very nearly half of all GPs reported arranging acupuncture treatment for their patients, mainly for pain relief and musculo-skeletal disorders. In addition, 46% of the respondents to that survey stated that they would like to receive further training in acupuncture in order to treat their own patients in the future.

Two surveys of BMAS members have been conducted previously. In the first, 774 responded to a detailed questionnaire about the type and amount of practice. The average number of acupuncture treatments given each week by GPs was 7.6. The overall median number of patients was six, suggesting that about 340 000 treatments were given by BMAS members each year. As in the present survey, the majority of consultations took place in the NHS. In the second, respondents were asked to state approximately how many patients they had treated with acupuncture in the last year. Of the 170 respondents, a half (83, or 49%) had treated less than 100, a quarter (45, or 26%) had treated 100 to 250, and the remaining quarter (42 or 25%) had treated over 250 patients. Out of this last group, a small group of 13 doctors (8% of all respondents) had treated more than 500 patients, ie on average at least 10 per week. Because of the format of the questions, the responses are not truly comparable, but they seem to suggest that the number of treatments each member gives per week is approximately constant, and the increase in total activity is due to the growth of the Society. Interestingly, a survey of representative groups of GPs found that their average use of acupuncture ‘in the last week’ was somewhat lower, at five per week. Since that survey would have included GPs who are not members of the Society, it appears that the Society represents the doctors who are the most active practitioners of acupuncture.

**Conclusion**

This survey suggests that members of the British Medical Acupuncture Society are generally in favour of a formal regulatory process for acupuncture, and that they provide a total of about one million acupuncture treatments a year, of which over a half are provided free within the National Health Service.

**Summary points**

- Previous surveys have shown that BMAS members conduct an average of about eight treatments each week
- A new survey of members has provided further evidence to support this figure
- It is estimated that BMAS members provide over a million acupuncture treatments each year, more than half of which are free within the NHS

**Competing interest**

Both authors are employed by the BMAS.

**Reference list**

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