



Acupuncture & Integrative Health at the Veterans Health Administration

Background

The nationwide opioid crisis has blanketed the country, and the veteran population is one of the hardest-hit by chronic and acute pain. In 2013, more than 2 million veterans suffered from a chronic pain diagnosis, and the number is only growing. More than 50% of older veterans experience chronic pain, and that proportion jumps to 60% for veterans who served in the Middle East. Up to 75% of female veterans suffer from chronic pain. America's veterans (along with active duty military) are facing high levels of pain, and widespread overreliance on opioid prescriptions only serves to exacerbate these issues. Fortunately, the Veterans Health Administration has worked to expand the availability of complementary and integrative health (CIH) treatments for veterans, including acupuncture for chronic pain.

Acupuncturist Job Classification

In February 2018, the Veterans Health Administration created a qualification standard for acupuncturists to become employed practitioners at the VA. Previously, the VA could only hire acupuncturists as contractors, and the agency had only recognized acupuncture as a treatment modality and not a profession. The standard sets the base requirements for an acupuncturist to be appointed as a VA practitioner, including education (Master's degree or Master's level program), licensure (active and unrestricted), and citizenship (U.S.). Most importantly, the VA requires NCCAOM Board-Certification as an essential part of ensuring safe and high-quality acupuncture treatment. The VA requires its acupuncturists to maintain a current NCCAOM certification and engage in continuing

education as mandated by NCCAOM. This classification will allow the thousands of veterans who suffer from chronic and acute pain to be treated by the most experienced and qualified acupuncturists, expanding access to treatment while protecting patient safety both at VA hospitals and throughout their outpatient referral networks.

VHA Work on Integrative Care

The VHA, as well as the Department of Defense, has been exploring and utilizing acupuncture and integrative care for years. The VHA has specifically worked to employ the Whole Health model, which approaches the veteran as a person instead of a problem and focuses on what matters most to the patient. By 2015, 93% of VHA facilities offered CIH services, with a focus on acupuncture and several other treatments with the best evidence of effectiveness. In 2009, the Army Pain Management Task Force was created to explore evidence-based complementary and alternative therapeutic modalities, including acupuncture, and this work has informed the VHA's provision of care in the years since. The VHA developed 19 demonstration sites nationwide in 2018 to serve as centers for whole health approaches for the veteran population, and the agency continues to expand acupuncture treatment across its sites. Other initiatives include the Acupuncture Training Across Clinical Settings (ATACS) program, which has significantly expanded availability of acupuncture for veterans. In the coming months, the VHA will also be launching a study focused on the implementation and effectiveness of Battlefield Acupuncture (BFA), a technique which has already been met with positive feedback from veterans and seen more than 1000 providers trained under ATACS.

93%

The percentage of VHA facilities that offered Complementary and Integrative Health (CIH) services, with a focus on acupuncture and several other treatments with the best evidence of effectiveness by 2015.