

Acupuncture is essential health benefit

As part of the Affordable Care Act, Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS) Kathleen Sebelius is currently soliciting opinion as to what the public would like to have as an Essential Health Benefit (EHB) covered by Medicaid, Medicare and private health insurance plans beginning in 2014. Treatments that prevent illness, promote wellness and help manage chronic disease can qualify as an Essential Health Benefit. Acupuncture does just that and deserves to be fully integrated into the health insurance system.

Acupuncture is a proven, cost-effective, safe, and comparatively clinically effective treatment for over 40 medical conditions as determined by The World Health Organization (WHO), The National Institution of Health (NIH) and thousands of worldwide research studies. Many studies demonstrate acupuncture lowers overall health care costs. For details go to the governance section of the website of the American Association of Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine (AAAOMonline.org) Unfortunately few Massachusetts health insurance companies cover acupuncture, and group policies that do, usually charge extra. State plans, such as MassHealth do not cover acupuncture.

While commonwealth residents are mandated to purchase health insurance, only the cash-rich can afford health insurance and pay cash for the health benefits of acupuncture. Under the current insurance system most working middle class patients can not afford acupuncture. Several local MDs have told me they would like to refer and integrate acupuncture into their patient's treatment plans but do not because it is not covered by insurance.

If you have experienced the healing effects of acupuncture, know of friends and family who have, and you want acupuncture covered as an Essential Health Benefit, email your experiences and support to

HHS at EssentialHealthBenefits@cms.hhs.gov before the deadline of Jan. 31.

You can also influence acupuncture coverage in Massachusetts. House Bill 3519, initiated by me and sponsored by Rep. "Smitty" Pignatelli and 15 co-sponsors, mandates acupuncture coverage in all Massachusetts health insurance policies. The Joint Committee on Financial Services (JCFS) has twice heard supporting testimony from patients, MDs and Licensed Acupuncturists (LAc). Before March 1, the JCFS will vote to either kill the bill or pass it on to The Health Care Financing Committee and eventually to the Legislature for debate and a vote. Email your support to JCFS Co-Chairs at Michael.Costello@mahouse.gov and Anthony.Petrucelli@masenate.gov.

RICHARD RUTH
Great Barrington

The writer has an MS in Oriental Medicine and is a board certified and licensed acupuncturist.

The Berkshire Eagle

Opinion

A4 — Wednesday, January 25, 2012

MASS. PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICE