

ETCMA Position Statement on “Dry Needle” Therapy

A growing number of European physical therapists (and other allied health care providers) are now offering a relatively new innovative needle therapy called *dry needling* or *intramuscular stimulation* or even *Invasive Physiotherapy*.

There has been a strong debate and conflict between the various health care professions wanting to claim ownership of ‘needle therapy’ especially in the past twenty years. This has created a great deal of confusion amongst the public sector (patients, policy makers, media, and professional interest groups) when investigating integrative health care treatments that involve ‘traditional acupuncture’ (TA) and/or ‘dry needling’ (DN) as a therapy. They are simply not aware of the differences between Education & Training, Scope of Practice, Diagnostics, and Therapeutic Strategies.

What is dry needling? What is acupuncture? Are they the same? Are they different? The purpose of this position statement is to clarify the difference between dry needling and acupuncture. This is important for patients, policy makers, healthcare professionals and professional specialist interest groups because of the associated differences in the two. This demarcation between TA and DN has been an ongoing subject of political controversy and the answers can be clearly defined when comparing the education in safety & training, the type of needles used, targeting of acupuncture points or trigger points, action mechanism, and therapeutic effects.

From a historical perspective, one point is clear. Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) clearly influenced the origin and practice of western medicine’s use of dry needling.

TCM is a complete health care system originally developed in ancient times in China. The scope of practice uses a wide range of remedial methods that include: Needle Therapy (acupuncture), Herbal Medicine (topically and internally), Nutrition (food as medicine), Heating Therapy (moxibustion, heat packs, and radiant heat), Therapeutic Massage (Tuina-Finger Pressure Techniques), Therapeutic Exercises for Rehabilitation, Range of Motion, Guided Stretching & Breathing Exercises (Tai Chi & Chi Gong) for Stress Reduction, Lifestyle Counseling, and Therapeutic Bathing.

The treatment of musculoskeletal pain and injury is a specialty within Chinese medicine often referred to as (骨伤学科) “gù shāng xué kē”^{1,2} (Orthopedics & Traumatology). This is when the full range of treatment modalities and remedial methods are considered and it has a long history of use for pain relief or in the management of a post recovery of an acute or chronic injury, or post-surgical treatments, as well as for rehabilitation.

The definition of “dry” needle involves the insertion of needles into tender or painful points in the body without the injection of any substance. It is used to treat a variety of musculoskeletal disorders. The more common approaches, which are best supported by research, targeting myofascial “trigger points³ is the same definition that is similar to acupuncture and the use of *Ashi Points*⁴. Technically, anyone using a “filiform” acupuncture needle is using a ‘dry’ needle (as opposed to a subcutaneous hypodermic needle) and that includes TCM practitioners. Dry Needling, however, is modern terminology used mainly to describe a new form of a therapeutic needling technique based on some theories and foundations of biomedicine. Dry Needling continues to evolve and there are a variety of different techniques, making the field more complex.

Dry Needling is one type of Acupuncture

As a professional association, the ETCMA has been deeply concerned about the public safety risks associated with the practice of dry needling administered by other allied health care medical providers who lack accredited education and regulations.

The term ‘dry needling’ can be misleading and can potentially be adopted by other allied health care providers who have not achieved the standards of education and training needed for adopting needle therapy as a treatment modality into the current scope of their practice. Thus, the promotion of the term “Dry Needle” as a therapy offered by other allied healthcare practitioners leaves the door open to allow one to sidestep the certification standards, safety, testing, necessary for the safe & competent practice of acupuncture without calling it acupuncture. This lack of professional education and training clearly exposes the public to serious and potentially hazardous risks, especially when obtaining **less than 300** hours of approved ‘medical acupuncture’ course training. However, even the World Health Organization recommends that medical acupuncturists should strive to reach a higher standard of 1500 hours of education as set forth in their [WHO: Guidelines on Basic Training and Safety in Acupuncture](#).

The art and science of Acupuncture is a complex therapeutic modality that cannot be mastered in a weekend or a month training course. Most of the training programs developed for the use of learning ‘dry’ needling do not require a follow-up of supervised clinical practice for patient treatments or competency examinations. The insertion of an acupuncture needle is considered an ‘invasive’ therapy. Therefore, we recommend that for the health and safety of the public, a practitioner needs to have sufficient knowledge and education.

The ETCMA advocates that filiform acupuncture needle techniques should **ONLY** be applied by health care professionals that undergo a clear and competent training in Traditional Acupuncture and Chinese Medicine, or Medical Acupuncture. Dry Needling is one type of Acupuncture.

For that reason, all societies that are members under the umbrella of the ETCMA respect the Safe Codes of Practice & Professional Code of Ethics in addition to the achievement of our kitemark in education, safety, and training⁵.

There are three points that moves the ETCMA in presenting this statement:

- ***The Health & Public Safety of the European Population***
- ***Respect for the Profession of Traditional Acupuncture***
- ***Ownership of Acupuncture within the Scope of TCM Practice***

Note: The term ‘acupuncture’ was originally coined in the late 17th century to describe the practice of ‘(針灸 Zhēn Jiǔ)’ as practiced in China, and has since then most often been associated with the practice of acupuncture informed by the theoretical framework of Traditional Chinese Medicine, but the term derives from the Latin ‘acus’ meaning needle plus to ‘puncture’.

Below is a comparison and contrast chart of the Educational Requirements and Clinical Applications for Traditional Acupuncture & Chinese Medicine, Medical Acupuncture, and Physical Therapy utilizing a Dry Needle Technique. Know Your Acupuncturist! Check their Educational Qualifications. Ask Questions. Be Safe in the hands of a professionally trained provider.

References:

¹ Xu Xiangcai, You Ke, Kang Kai, Bao Xuequan, and Lu Yibin, eds. *Orthopedics and Traumatology, The English-Chinese Encyclopedia of Practical Chinese Medicine, Volume 14.* Beijing: Higher Education Press, 1992

²Kendall, D.E. *Dao of Chinese Medicine: Understanding an Ancient Healing Art.* Oxford, Hong Kong, New York: Oxford University Press, March 2002

³Dommerholt J: *Dry needling - peripheral and central considerations.* *J Man Manip Ther* 19: 223–227, 2011.

⁴Shan JIANG Jing-sheng ZHAO: *The historical source of "Trigger Points": classical Ashi points.* Institute of Acupuncture and Moxibustion, China Academy of Chinese Medical Sciences, Beijing 100700, China, April 2017

⁵ETCMA: *Minimum Educational Criteria for Membership of the ETCMA, October 2014*

Know Who is Administering your Acupuncture!

Contact Hours in Acupuncture	Practitioner Title	Clinical Application
<p>Education:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 3-5 years ● 1500 – 3600+ hours of Academic and clinical learning in Acupuncture & Traditional Chinese Medicine which include 450 hours of western sciences, and 600 hours of clinical internship ● Degree Levels: Bachelors, Masters, and Doctorate <p>Reference: www.who.int <u>Benchmarks for Training in Traditional Chinese Medicine</u></p>	<p>Practitioner of Chinese Medicine, Licensed Acupuncturist, Registered Acupuncturist, Certified Acupuncturist, Doctor of Acupuncture or Doctor of Acupuncture & Oriental Medicine all who have obtained a degree/diploma from an accredited college or Chinese medical university and has passed a battery of competency examinations.</p> <p>Three Academic Degrees are available: Bachelors, Masters, Doctorate</p>	<p>Traditional Chinese Medicine is a complete system of health care originally developed in ancient times.</p> <p>It addresses a broad range of health conditions outlined by the World Health Organization www.who.int</p> <p>TCM includes a range of therapeutic approaches:</p> <p>Needling Therapy, Herbal Medicine & Nutrition, Heating therapy (moxibustion), Manipulation (Tui Na), Massage, Exercises for Rehabilitation, Strength, and Range of Motion, Guided Stretches, Breathing Exercises, Stress Management, Lifestyle Counseling, and Therapeutic Bathing</p>
<p>Education: 300 hours or less in acupuncture.</p> <p>Reference: www.icmart.org <u>ICMART Lexicon of Medical Acupuncture</u></p> <p>Physicians are well trained in needling procedures so safety is not considered to be a problem.</p>	<p>Medical Acupuncturist is an MD who uses acupuncture as an adjunctive technique. The World Health Organization (WHO) recommend that medical doctors who wish to use acupuncture as a ‘technique’ in their specialized clinical work have a minimum of 200 hours of training for their specific application. However, the WHO also recommended that 1500 hours of training or more be obtained in acupuncture for physicians.</p>	<p>Clinical Application</p> <p>Symptomatic Relief & Pain Management.</p> <p>*Competency Exams & Clinical Practice vary from country to country. For example, in Austria MDs need to pass a written and oral exam to get approved as medical acupuncturists by the Austrian medical chamber.</p>
<p>Education: 100 hours or less</p>	<p>Acupuncture Technician or Detox Specialist</p> <p>NO competency exams are required.</p>	<p>Addiction Treatment</p>
<p>Education: 40-50 hours of continuing education in local “dry needling” techniques taught in one weekend, or one month course only.</p>	<p>Physical Therapist who uses acupuncture in the treatment of muscle trigger points.</p> <p>NO competency exams are required.</p>	<p>Muscular-Skeletal Pain</p>

Please Note: Member Societies within the ETCMA may differ in opinion based on the legal framework and scope of practices as defined by their country’s rules and regulatory commissions that oversee certain professions.