

The new face of health care

B.C. set an example for the Western world last month by licensing doctors of traditional Chinese medicine. ALEXANDRA GILL goes under the needle to check out a popular new treatment: 'facial rejuvenation'

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An acupuncture facelift looks far more painful than it actually is. Or at least that's what I keep telling myself as the doctor pokes another needle in my ear. Ouch!

This ancient Chinese beauty treatment requires nearly 100 needles, far more than the dozen or so used for most acupuncture. It is also nearly twice as expensive (\$120 per session) and time-consuming (1.5 hours). But the results of a 12-treatment series -- reduced wrinkles, firmer muscle tone, improved collagen production and circulation -- are supposed to be better than Botox.

Each year, thousands of Canadians turn to acupuncture as an alternative treatment for everything from migraines to multiple sclerosis. But as the ancient healing art becomes ever more mainstream, many are now discovering that traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) has cosmetic applications as well.

Last month, British Columbia became the first province in Canada (and the first jurisdiction in the western world) to confer professional status -- and responsibility -- on the full sweep of traditional Chinese therapies.

Acupuncture has been regulated in B.C. since 1999 (and is also regulated in Alberta and Quebec). But under the new legislation, all TCM practitioners -- including acupuncturists and those who work with medicinal herbs, energy-control therapy and rehabilitation exercises such as qigong -- must now be licensed by the College of Traditional Chinese Medicine Practitioners and Acupuncturists, a self-regulatory body created by the provincial government three years ago.

"This is one of our prouder moments," says Sindi Hawkins, B.C.'s minister of Health Planning, who presided over the licensing ceremony in Vancouver. "This is a profession from Eastern medicine that's more than 4,000 years old and we're the first jurisdiction in the West to recognize it. People here wanted that choice. We wanted to ensure they had a safe, quality choice."

Chinese medicine isn't covered in the province's medical services plan, although a growing number of private extended health plans now include it.

The 392 practitioners who received licences at the June ceremony will be regulated in much the same way as physicians, nurses and massage therapists. They must complete specific education requirements and a series of safety courses, pass licensing examinations, carry at least \$1-million in malpractice insurance and meet professional conduct standards.

More than half -- 230 -- were licensed as Doctors of Traditional Chinese Medicine. (The other titles granted were Registered Acupuncturist, Registered TCM Practitioner and Registered TCM Herbalist.)

The doctors, who are trained in the entire panoply of traditional Chinese therapies, must prove that they have completed five years of TCM education at a recognized institute. (Practitioners must study for four years, while acupuncturists and herbalists need three years of study.)

Dr. **Tahmineh** Nikookar is one of these newly licensed doctors. Born in Iran, with a master's degree in chemical engineering, she became interested in Chinese medicine after her husband had acupuncture to treat a shoulder problem. The results, says Dr. Nikookar, were amazing. She became fascinated with the philosophy, and studied at the Tai Shan medical college in China, where she received a degree in Chinese medicine, and at the Canadian College of Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine in Victoria, where she obtained a diploma in herbology.

Since starting her Vancouver practice in 1995, Dr. Nikookar has become one of the few Canadian practitioners of Chinese medicine to specialize in facial rejuvenation. She says the procedure -- which combines acupuncture, energy work and herbs -- is thousands of years old but went out of fashion in China when the Communists came to power.

Vanity may be the primary reason her clients see her, but Dr. Nikookar says the procedure is more than just cosmetic. "It treats the whole body, from the inside out." As with all Chinese therapies, facial rejuvenation is based on the principle of *chi*, the invisible vital energy that, according to traditional Chinese medicine, flows through organs and along internal pathways, or meridians.

Using energy work, herbal creams and dozens of acupuncture needles, some so tiny they must be handled with tweezers, the procedure helps stimulate the smooth circulation of energy throughout the body, with an emphasis on the face, and improve natural collagen production. A series of at least seven treatments is recommended in order to attain the full benefits, which could include firmer facial muscles, tighter pores, the reduction of fine lines, brighter eyes and glowing skin.

Before we get started with the needles, she takes me through a series of questions about my medical history. Dr. Nikookar will not treat people with high blood pressure. "It brings all the yang to the head." Nor will she treat anyone who has had prior facial plastic surgery. "In case something has gone wrong and I get blamed."

She inspects my tongue, takes my pulse and asks me to remove my clothes and lie down under a sheet on the examination table.

"Close your eyes," she instructs, as she waves a small wooden pendulum over the length of my body to check my energy flow. I take a quick peek, and see it wobbling erratically over my stomach.

"You are very unbalanced," Dr. Nikookar sighs.

Most of Dr. Nikookar's patients find her through an ad in the Yellow Pages, or through word of mouth. Luckily for them, she is skilled and highly qualified. Not everyone is so fortunate. You might recall the Toronto acupuncture clinic that was closed down last winter after more than 20 patients were infected with a rare skin disease. That sort of scenario is far less likely to happen in B.C., now that province-wide standards ensure that practitioners abide by proper infection-control practices.

Of the 554 practitioners who applied for the new licences, 162 were denied. Sixteen of the failed applicants had tried to pass off fraudulent credentials.

If patients encounter unsafe or improper conduct, they can lodge a complaint with the College.

The professional designation of TCM in B.C. could set a precedent for other provinces. In Alberta, the Society of Traditional Chinese Medicine has submitted an application for regulation to the

Health Professions Advisory Board, which is now studying the proposal before making recommendations.

Ontario may be slower to follow. In a recent report to the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario expressed "strong reservations" about the creation of a self-regulatory body for TCM, although it supports the practice of acupuncture as a treatment for pain.

"I know the world is watching us," says Ms. Hawkins. "I think that it's important for other governments in Canada to consider what we've done. I think they'll see that this balance of east meets west can co-exist and complement one another."

Western medicine is comparable to sending in a SWAT team, says Dr. Randy Wong, registrar of the B.C. College and former chief executive officer of Mission Memorial Hospital.

"Eastern medicine, for lack of a better analogy, is more like sending in a social worker. The situation is diffused, and work is done on the root causes of illness so you can address the problem before having to send in a SWAT team to blow it away."

Dr. Wong agrees that a SWAT team is still sometimes needed. But he insists the two schools of medicine can be complementary.

"It all goes back to the ancient philosophy of Chinese medicine, which aims to restore the body's balance. If your body is balanced, you can live to a ripe old age. It won't make a 50-year-old man look 18 again, but it can help restore your energy."

One Vancouver woman swears her facial acupuncture worked wonders. The 58-year-old artist, who asked that her name not be published because she hasn't told any of her friends about the procedure, began seeing Dr. Nikookar for facial treatments last year. She wanted to do something about the fine lines around her eyes. "But I didn't want my face cut with a knife," she explains.

She says she began seeing results after the first visit. She carried through with a series of 15 treatments, and now continues to see Dr. Nikookar for maintenance sessions every month and uses her herbal cleansers and face creams daily. The difference in her appearance, she says, is night and day.

"My skin is tighter. I don't have jowls anymore -- and no crow's feet. My eyelids are firmer. And the little lines around my lips are gone. My skin tone is much brighter. I don't even wear makeup anymore. It's amazing what she can do."

Despite her positive experience, she says her friends wouldn't understand why she's doing it. "[Chinese medicine] is becoming more popular, but a lot of people are still skeptical."

I'm skeptical too, as I lie on the examination table in the dark feeling like a human pincushion. Dr. Nikookar has pierced nearly 100 needles into my head, face, hands, legs and feet. And now she's left me alone to let the energy start flowing.

The needles are supposed to help me relax, but I feel restless. When Dr. Nikookar comes back five minutes later to check on me, I tell her the needles don't hurt, but it feels as though all the tension in my body has gone straight to my backside.

The concerned look on her face is not comforting. She rubs her hands together, stretches out her palms and begins slowly waving them across my body. "There is a big blockage here," she says, pausing above my abdomen. She goes to work on the area, trying to draw out the tension with her hands.

Suddenly, my body responds and starts lifting up toward her hands. I swear I'm not controlling it. I peer down my nose past pins the size of walrus tusks and watch as she continues doing her energy work until my abdomen settles back down onto the bed. I don't know how she did it, but the tension is gone.

The same thing happens after she removes the needles and begins massaging my head to drain the toxins out of my lymph system. "Why are you moving your head like that?" she asks, as it rocks side to side.

Uh, I thought she was doing that.

It's another blockage. (In my brain?)

When the procedure is complete, I don't see dramatic differences. Sure, my eyes look a bit brighter, the skin under my chin is slightly more taut and my normally pale face is shining with an unnaturally healthy glow.

What I do notice, however, is how my body feels -- blissfully relaxed and slightly wobbly, as if I have just emerged from a warm bubble bath. I think I'm beginning to understand the ancient Chinese secret. If you feel this good, who cares about wrinkles?

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Complementary care by numbers

The demand for complementary health care is booming. In 2000, Canadians spent approximately \$500-million on natural health-care products.

Within a six-month period in 1999, approximately 30 per cent of British Columbians and Albertans, and 25 per cent of people from Ontario, had been to an alternative-care practitioner at least once. Although those numbers do not specify which type of alternative treatments they sought, TCM represents one of the most widely used forms of complementary medicine, along with massage and naturopathy.

Who's most likely to consult complementary and alternative health practitioners? Female patients (21 per cent of Canadian women have had a consultation, compared with 17 per cent of men), and people aged 25 to 54. (About 23 per cent of Canadians in that age group say they've turned to alternative care, compared with 16 per cent of those 55 and over, and 14 per cent in the 12 to 24 age group.)

Sources: Non-Prescription Drug Manufacturers Association, Berger Population Health Monitor, Canadian Community Health Survey