

Acupuncturist under-employment and unemployment

Why are workforce data so difficult to find when it comes to acupuncture? Why have the leading professional organizations - ACAOM, AAAOM, CCAOM - shown such little interest in acquiring these data? Only five surveys have been conducted and published that attempt to describe what a graduate can expect upon graduation. The terrible truth is that the chance a new graduate has for earning a living in acupuncture is no better than flipping a coin. Options for working are limited almost exclusively to private practice. One of the most widely read reports reflected on the problems inherent professionally when graduates are limited to essentially one choice. “The demand for acupuncture appears to be almost exclusively for private consultations. *There is a very limited job market for acupuncturists*, with the only significant employers being acupuncture schools and drug treatment programs...Opportunities for acupuncturists to participate in the health care system in the same way other providers do are limited”.¹

The most widely reported study on acupuncture workforce prospects was published in 1999.² This is the study most frequently cited on AOM school websites because (i) it is the first one, and (ii) it leads the reader to conclude an acupuncturist can expect to earn approximately \$100,000 annually once the practice is running full steam at 39 patients weekly who pay \$57 per visit!! Unfortunately, this is a distortion. The study assessed pediatric care (instead an adult population) among 140 licensed acupuncturists in the Boston area. Seventeen acupuncturists, including two physicians, had “practices...located in Boston's wealthier suburbs” and “saw an average of 58 patients weekly”. The standard deviation for weekly patient visits was 35 meaning some saw 23 and others 83. When responses are spread so widely reporting the average is misleading.

A second publication in 2002 reported practice characteristics for massage therapists, acupuncturists, and chiropractors.³ Acupuncturists were represented by 180 from Massachusetts (in effect a check on the 1999 Boston sample) and 151 from Washington. Approximately one-third of the acupuncturists had to be eliminated from the randomly drawn sample because they did not have valid telephone numbers or were not in practice. Median weekly visits of 25 and 20 were reported, respectively, for the Massachusetts and Washington samples. These findings were more realistic than the 1999 study because they drew a larger sample, focused on adult patient, and did not include physician acupuncturists.

In 2006 a RAND-affiliated study reported on a random sample of 276 California acupuncturists that completed a survey in 2001 (in effect a check on the 2002 study).⁴ Even though 57% described their practice as “full-time”, 38% earned less than \$35,000 annually. This means a significant number of “full-time” acupuncturists averaged no better than \$23 in fees; once again half what was reported in the 1999 study. The most recent survey was completed in 2008 by the National Certification Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine.⁵ They estimated 60% of 712 from a national random sample (~250 from California) work part-time (defined as less than 30 hrs weekly), and 70.1% earn less than \$60,000.

The most recent survey was conducted by the California Acupuncture Board. Their Occupational Analysis included questions about hours worked (no income). This survey found one-third worked 40 or more hours weekly while 28% worked less than 20.⁶

Acupuncture workforce information is hard to come by. The handful of studies that have been completed between 1999 and 2009 suggest prospects for earning a basic income are actually getting worse. More acupuncturists are working fewer hours and earning less income. The leading professional organizations appear to be uninterested at best in addressing this issue.

The five acupuncture workforce studies are summarized in the table below.

STUDY	SAMPLE	OUTCOME MEASURE	MEAN/MEDIAN	COMMENT
Lee et.al.. 1999	140; “cross sectional” Boston only	visits per week; follow up fee	mean visits = 39 ± 24; mean fee = \$54 ± \$14	17 acupuncturists averaged 58 visits weekly (standard deviation ± 35)
Cherkin et.al.. 2002	217 total; 91 in Mass.; 89 in Wash.; random sample with high dropout rate	visits per week	mean: Mass. = 33.7 ± 24.7; Wash. = 27 ± 21.1; median: Mass. = 25; Wash. = 20	34% and 37% of original sample eliminated because they did not have a phone # or were not in practice
Kuo et.al.. 2006	276 California only; random selection	full or part time work; annual income	57% work full time; 43% part time; 50% earn <\$50,000/yr.; 38% earn <\$35,000/yr	Data collected in 2002-03
NCCAOM, 2008	712 national; stratified random sample	full or part time work; annual income	60% work part time (<30 hrs weekly); 70.1% earn <\$60,000	36% of sample from California; data collected in 2007
CAB, 2009	553 statewide; stratified random sample	full or part time work; practice type and setting	32% work >40 hours weekly; 38% work >20 and <40 hours; 28% work <20 hours	data collected in 2008

The NGAOM supports an initiative that will prepare acupuncturists to work in mainstream medicine. This means emphasizing evidence-based instruction needed to work in modern healthcare. This means training acupuncturists to work in primary care as was the intent of the Acupuncture Licensing Act of 1980. Acupuncturists, trained in primary care will able to describe what they do in terms of evidence-based concepts, will find a place in mainstream medicine working alongside other similarly trained healthcare providers.

1. Dower C. Acupuncture in California. UCSF Center for the Health Professions, April 2003
2. Lee ACC, Highfield ES, Berde CS, Kemper KJ. Survey of acupuncturists: Practice characteristics and pediatric care. *West J Med* 1999; 171: 153-157.
3. Cherkin DC, Deyo RA, Sherman KJ, Hart GL, Street JH, Hrbek A, Cramer E, Milliman B, Booker J, Mootz R, Barassi J, Kahn JR, Kaptchuk TJ, and Eisenberg DM. Characteristics of Licensed Acupuncturists, Chiropractors, Massage Therapists, and Naturopathic Physicians. *J Am Board Fam Pract* 2002; 15: 378–390.
4. Kuo T, Christensen R, Gelberg L, Rubenstein L, Burke A. Research in the acupuncturist community. *Ethn Dis* 2006; 16 [suppl 1]: S1-98–S1-106.
5. Ward-Cook, K, Smith B. Presentation to California Acupuncture Board, Nov. 2008, unpublished data.
6. Occupational Analysis outcomes presented to the California Acupuncture Board, March 2009, unpublished

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