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31

*Acupuncture
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IS AN ACUPUNCTURIST A DOCTOR?

By, Kath Bartlett, MS, LAc

Occasionally a prospective patient will call and during the conversation will ask whether s/he should address me as Dr. Bartlett. With an albeit vain attempt at humor, I will sometimes reply, "You can call me whatever you want, just don't call me late for dinner!" But really, the question 'Is an acupuncturist a doctor?' deserves a serious and more complete answer.

In the broad sense of the word, as defined by *Webster's New World Dictionary*, "4. a person licensed to practice any of the healing arts, as an osteopath, dentist, veterinarian, etc."¹: yes, an acupuncturist is a doctor. However, Webster's begins its definition thus:

2. a person on whom a university or college has conferred one of its highest degrees, either after he has fulfilled certain academic requirements or as an honorary title 3. a physician or surgeon (MD)²

It is on the basis of these earlier definitions of the term that causes the NY Times Ethicist, Randy Cohen to state unequivocally that it is against medical ethics for an acupuncturist not possessing a medical doctoral degree to refer to him/herself as a doctor. Cohen feels that using the Dr. title intentionally misleads the public who naturally will assume that the 'doctor' holds a medical, doctorate degree, thus causing the ethical transgression.

Acupuncture is medical field new to the US. As such, the field is in its' early phases of growth and development. The first two 4,000 hour doctoral programs in oriental medicine began in 2004. It will be some years before the doctorate degree becomes the standard for entry into the Oriental medical field. Currently, the highest degree of received by graduates is the 3,200 Master's of Science in Traditional Oriental Medicine.

Adding to the confusion, early programs offered an OMD (Oriental Medical Doctorate) degree to graduates. The problem was that the degree did not meet the 4,000-hour standard set for a medical doctorate degree required for MD's and chiropractors. Still in its' initial phase, the acupuncture community agreed that for the profession to advance and gain necessary credibility, the OMD degree must be dropped. The acupuncture colleges collectively agreed to grant only Master's degrees. (This degree is also misleading as master degree programs generally require one or two years of graduate level studies; whereas at the more rigorous acupuncture colleges, the MSTOM can be up to a 3,350 hour program, requiring four years of year round study, at an accelerated pace, to complete).

To further stir the broth, a few states, such as New Mexico and Rhode Island confer the title of doctor as part of state licensure. (Most states, such as North Carolina, grant licensees the title of Licensed Acupuncturist). Usually, when state licensing agencies confer a doctor title, they require licensees to be educated and trained in the practice of some of the western biomedical sciences, such as reading and interpreting western medical lab work, scans and diagnostic tests, and allow licensees to order these diagnostic tests as part of their scope of practice.

North Carolina does not allow acupuncturists to order western medical lab and diagnostic tests as part of their scope of practice. Further, North Carolina law only allows licensees to use the Dr. title if s/he holds a doctorate degree in the field of medicine (one cannot parlay another state's licensure title of doctor or a PHD degree earned in another field of study to one's acupuncture practice in North Carolina).

^{1, 2} Guralnik, D, *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language*, Second College Edition. William's Collins Publishers, Inc., p 414.

THE ETHICIST BY RANDY COHEN

I recently earned a Masters of Science in Traditional Oriental Medicine and became a Licensed Acupuncturist in North Carolina. State law says, "Possession of a license under this Article does not by itself entitle a person to identify oneself as a doctor or physician." However, one of my teachers advised me to refer to myself as "Dr. Bartlett" because I diagnose and treat disease, the dictionary definition of a doctor. Should I be uneasy about this? KATH BARTLETT, ASHEVILLE, NC

The important consideration here is not what Webster says but what your patients believe. If you identify your self as Dr. Bartlett while performing a medical service, they will take you to be a physician, a medical doctor. And they'd be reasonable to do so. Here in America, we reserve that title for M.D.'s, the occasional academic with a Ph.D., and puffed-up social climbers. It would be unethical to so deceive those sufferers who seek your help. Your task is to convey clearly to them your training and experience, which preclude calling yourself Dr. (And then there is that pesky state law you yourself cite.)

I bring a certain personal skepticism to your question. Assailed with back pain, I visited an acupuncturist identified on his office door and on the shingle bolted to the front of his building as Dr. . . . well, let's just call him Dr. Liar. As I sat on his table, my shirt off, my back peppered with tiny needles - I looked like a balding porcupine - I asked him about his medical education. He had earned his honorific, he said, by completing his Ph.D. in French literature. This was not an ideal moment for me to receive such information. Somehow, I felt that by calling himself Dr. Liar on his business card, he was not attempting to convey the fact that one might seek him out for a lively discussion of Proust. He was being deliberately deceptive, a course you do well to renounce.