

Scope of Practice in WMA

a position paper from the BMAS with recommendations for healthcare professionals when using Western Medical Acupuncture (WMA)

Introduction

Acupuncture techniques are becoming ever more popular within orthodox healthcare environments. The standard techniques are easy to learn, and provided safety principles are well taught, there should be minimal direct risks from applying the therapy. Indirect risks are much more difficult to monitor and quantify, and therefore can be overlooked. This paper aims to clarify these risks and provide guidance to professionals in their practice of WMA.

Professional regulation & scope of practice

Regulation of healthcare professionals can take a number of forms, but the key aspect for most professions involves registration on a formal list held and administered by a statutory regulating body. The title of the profession can only be used by individuals listed on the register, and in order to stay on the register an individual must maintain certain specified levels of professional practice. Codes of professional practice inevitably follow very similar principles, so we consider that most regulators would expect that any of their registrants who are taking on a new technique must be:

1. properly trained
2. competent
3. indemnified
4. working within the scope of their professional practice.

WMA techniques are most often used for management of symptoms, eg pain. Such symptoms are common to a huge array of different underlying conditions, and therefore cross the professional scope of practice of many different professions, including both generalists and specialists.

Learning the principles of treatment in WMA allows the practitioner to formulate a treatment plan for a certain symptom pattern irrespective of whether or not the underlying condition falls within their normal scope of professional practice. The critical step is therefore to distinguish between:

- A. management of the underlying condition (including the decision to treat), and
- B. the application of a therapeutic technique.

A practitioner simply needs to separately consider whether or not these aspects fall within their normal scope of practice. Brief training of regulated healthcare professionals in WMA techniques can expand their therapeutic potential ie expand aspect B above, but it will not alter aspect A to any significant degree.

Recommendations for practitioners

If a patient presents for treatment and you can fulfill professional requirements 1-4 above, then you are free, in partnership with the patient, to make the decision to treat and proceed to treatment.

If the patient presents with a symptom that you feel competent to treat, but may have an underlying condition which would fall outside your professional scope of practice, you should ensure that a suitable clinician has seen the patient for assessment prior to treatment. Usually this will entail asking the patient to obtain a referral from their GP or specialist.