

Acupuncture, TCM Gain Credibility in Italy

By Editorial Staff

Italy's national medical association, the National Federation for the Orders of Doctors and Dentists, has formally recognized acupuncture, traditional Chinese medicine and seven other types of alternative medicine as legitimate forms of health care.

The decision was reached during a meeting of the Federation's national council in May, and an official request has been made to Parliament calling for new laws to regulate the different forms of care.

Currently, only medical doctors are legally allowed to practice acupuncture in Italy. However, recognizing the benefits of acupuncture and traditional Chinese medicine could open the door for future legislation that would allow these therapies to be practiced by licensed acupuncturists or doctors of Oriental medicine.

In addition to acupuncture and TCM, the council of doctors formally recognized anthroposophic medicine (a form of healing that incorporates standard therapeutic techniques with spiritual scientific studies), ayurveda, chiropractic, homeopathy, osteopathy and phytotherapy.

The council's move was welcomed by the Italian Federation of Acupuncture Societies (IFAS). "This document represents a cultural and scientific turning point," commented IFAS President Dr. Carlo Maria Giovanardi. "Now we hope that the Health Ministry will include some non-conventional therapies such as acupuncture in the basic levels of health assistance."

The council also laid out a series of guidelines urging all doctors who choose to practice alternative medicine to take rigorous training and specific education programs. Until legislation is passed, the Federation vowed that it would "prosecute with disciplinary sanctions those doctors who do not respect these guidelines."

To help guarantee against substandard care or mistreatment of patients, the council proposed the creation of a national health agency for alternative medicine. The agency would be comprised of representatives of the Federation, the Health Ministry, the Regions (a total of 20 throughout Italy) and the Ministry of University and Scientific and Technological Research, and would be charged with regulating unconventional therapies, promoting research, and managing alternative medicine training and education programs.

It is believed the federation's decision may have been the result, at least partially, of studies showing an increase in the use of acupuncture, traditional Chinese medicine and other alternative therapies in the past few years. According to a recent report from Istat, the country's national statistics bureau, some nine million Italians - nearly 16% of the population - use complementary and alternative medicine to treat illness, and a majority of people would like these therapies to be provided free of charge by the national health system.

Italy is not the first European country to take steps toward recognizing acupuncture and Oriental medicine. In January 1999, Belgium passed legislation defining the way acupuncture can be practiced and taught. Alternative medicine (including acupuncture) was recognized by Portugal's Parliament in June 2000; that same month, the British Medical Association officially acknowledged the benefits of acupuncture and recommended that it be incorporated into the National Health Service.



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