



Chieftain photo by Mike Sweeney

Acupuncturist Troy Sammons says people should be assertive about the nontraditional and alternative-medicine treatments and doctors they seek.

Acupuncturist urges public to screen holistic practitioners

By KAREN VIGIL

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More people these days are being assertive about their health care and taking advantage of the Internet to research ailments and possible treatments.

While that's good, they need to take the kind same of interest when choosing holistic practitioners, says Pueblo West acupuncturist Troy Sammons.

Sammons says it's especially important for Colorado residents, because the state does not license holistic practitioners as it does medical doctors, chiropractors or acupuncturists like himself through its Department of Regulatory Agencies (DORA).

"Due to the lack of specific regulations regarding holistic practitioners, I regularly hear stories of scams, irresponsible medical advice and practices, and misrepresentation by holistic practitioners," he said.

Most of the problems he's heard about involve people who call themselves "naturopaths" and "herbalists," probably because Colorado does not regulate those titles.

Of course, he said, some people are educated in those fields, and he thinks those legitimate practitioners would prefer that Colorado license their specialities.

Until that happens, he said, it's important that people "check up on their practitioner to make sure they are what they say they are."

Sammons says the problem of unqualified practitioners taking advantage of unwitting patients is worsened because both parties often misunderstand the laws governing the practice of medicine.

"Some practitioners believe that if licensure for their particular specialty does not exist, it is legal for them to practice medicine.

"On the contrary, any unlicensed practitioner can be criminally charged with practicing medicine without a license. The lack of a law or regulation does not make it legal," he said.

Further, Sammons said, there always are "the good and the bad, the legitimate and illegitimate" in any profession, so it just makes good sense to ask about credentials, billing practices and so on.

Qualified practitioners won't mind taking the time to explain these issues, he said, because it helps consumers protect themselves from unethical practitioners and promotes the growth of the holistic professions.

Sammons said he holds a master's degree in acupuncture and Oriental medicine from the Oregon College of Oriental Medicine, is certified by the National Certification Committee for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine, and is a health-care provider for several health-insurance companies.

He offered the following tips when choosing a holistic practitioner.

- Can the practitioner describe his/her education credentials or title? If they refer to themselves as "doctor" or list a Ph.D. after their name, ask them to give details as to the nature of the doctorate degree.

- Ask about his/her formal education, certification and training. This includes training from accredited institutions, internships, continuing education, memberships, national certification and how long they have been in practice.
- Does the practitioner have a disclosure statement for new patients that lists training, fees for services, acknowledgement of a code of ethics, and contact information for his particular agency or board?
- Ask practitioners if their specialty is required to be licensed or registered with the state or local government. What national organization do they belong to that regulates their scope of practice? All registered, licensed, or certified practitioners can be verified with a simple phone call.

For verification of Colorado licensures, call the Department of Regulatory Agencies at (303) 894-7855, or visit the Web site at www.dora.state.co.us . Most national organizations have Web sites and a listing of members.

- Do they carry general liability and/or malpractice insurance?
- Do they dispense medicines such as herbs, vitamins and minerals, homeopathic medicines, essential oils, etc.? If so, does their scope of practice include the dispensing of these items? Using the example of acupuncture and Oriental medicine, a practitioner must have formal training in medicinal herbs and the dispensing of herbal medicines in order to legally dispense these items.
- What are the fees for services or the average cost of an initial and follow-up visit? Some practitioners will give a quote that excludes costs for medicines, additional tests or treatment modalities. Also, avoid paying for treatments ahead of time or purchasing package plans.

Some practitioners will try to sell a package deal or require a certain number of visits. This practice results in financial gain to the practitioner and rarely benefits the patient. Patients should determine how long they see the practitioner based on results they get.

- Ask practitioners if they are providers for any health-insurance companies. In order for a practitioner to be on an insurance-provider list, he must be in compliance with all laws associated with their profession and abide by additional requirements.

These requirements include having malpractice and general liability insurance, passing facility inspections, following specific sanitation procedures and avoiding use of certain potentially harmful products.

