

ADVISORY ON ACUPUNCTURE TREATMENT METHODS



Statement of Intent

The contents of this publication are based on the best available information, locally and internationally, at the time of development and are subject to change as knowledge advances and the practice of acupuncture treatments evolve.

For avoidance of doubt, the term Traditional Chinese Medicine practitioner(s) used throughout this publication include(s) registered acupuncturist(s)

Effective Date: 1 January 2027

PREFACE

The **Advisory on Acupuncture Treatment Methods (this “Advisory”)** is prepared by the Traditional Chinese Medicine Practitioners Board (“the Board”), with consultation and inputs from local TCM professional organisations and the Ministry of Health.

This Advisory aims to provide practical guidance to Traditional Chinese Medicine practitioners (TCMPs), including registered acupuncturists, in choosing generally accepted acupuncture and other related treatments and to avoid higher risk acupuncture and other related treatments which can cause harm and injury to the patients. The Board hopes that this would safeguard patient safety and bring about greater consistency in clinical practice among TCMPs. The Board recognises that clinical practice and professional standards evolve over time and may review and update this Advisory periodically to reflect the changes in clinical practice and standards.

TCMPs are reminded to only use appropriate and generally accepted methods of TCM treatment as approved by the Board. Unorthodox TCM treatment or any treatment that may tarnish the reputation of the TCM profession must be avoided.

This Advisory should be read together with the Ethical Code and Ethical Guidelines (ECEG) for Traditional Chinese Medicine Practitioners, General Advisory on Acupuncture (GAA) and other relevant General Advisories issued by the Ministry of Health and the Board. TCMPs are reminded to adhere to the requirements and standards set out in this Advisory, the ECEG, GAA and the relevant General Advisories.

Prof Lim Shih Hui

Registrar

Traditional Chinese Medicine Practitioners Board

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This Advisory was developed under the guidance and oversight of the Committee on Acupuncture Treatment Methods and Training (12 October 2020 - 11 October 2026) which provides expertise and insights throughout the development and review process on the appropriate acupuncture treatment methods in Singapore. The Board acknowledges the contributions of the following members, in the review of this Advisory.

Committee on Acupuncture Treatment Methods and Training

Chairman: Seow Ser Fatt

Deputy Chairman: Kuo Tung Ho

Members: Chew Say Yeow

Cui Shuli

Lau Kah Yong

See Long Hian

Clare Chou (Left on 12 October 2023)

Ng Sock Peng (New member appointed on 12 October 2023)

The Board also acknowledges the contributions of the following TCM professional organisations whose feedback on the Committee's preliminary recommendations was obtained and considered prior to the finalisation of this Advisory.

S/N	TCM Organisation	S/N	TCM Organisation
1	Academy of Chinese Medicine Singapore	8	Singapore Chinese Physicians' Association
2	Institute of Chinese Medical Studies	9	Singapore Chung Hwa Medical Institution
3	NTU Chinese Medicine Alumni Association	10	Singapore College of TCM
4	NTU School of Biological Sciences	11	Singapore Thong Chai Medical Institution
5	Public Free Clinic Society	12	Society of Traditional Chinese Medicine (Singapore)
6	Singapore Acupuncture Association	13	The Association for Promoting Chinese Medicine
7	Singapore Buddhist Free Clinic	14	The Singapore Chinese Medicine Union

1. Background and Purpose

1.1 The Board has observed a rise in complaints related to acupuncture and moxibustion treatments. From 2016 to 30 September 2024, the Board received a total of 35 complaints cases, of which 20 cases (57%) were related to acupuncture and moxibustion treatments as detailed in **Annex A**. These cases have highlighted the need for greater clarity in the interpretation of the appropriateness of acupuncture and other related treatments.

1.2 In view of this, the Board issued this Advisory to provide greater clarity on the use of treatment methods in clinical practice. This includes categorisation of methods into those which are considered generally acceptable, which TCMPs are allowed to perform on the one hand, and those that are considered higher risk on the other hand, which TCMPs must not perform. TCMPs are obliged to provide proper and appropriate medical care to patients. It is also the TCMPs' professional duty to protect the safety and act in the best interests of their patients when providing acupuncture and other related treatments. For the avoidance of doubt, this Advisory sets out the Board's pre-existing position as to the appropriate and generally accepted acupuncture and related treatment methods.

1.3 The intent of this Advisory is to support TCMPs in exercising sound clinical judgement, promote greater consistency in practice, and safeguard patient safety and to serve as a practical reference to guide decision-making on the ground. The Board recognises that clinical practice and professional standards evolve over time and the Board may review and update this Advisory periodically to reflect those changes.

2 Guiding Principles

2.1 This advisory applies to all TCMPs registered with the Board.

2.2 TCMPs are advised to:

2.2.1 Prioritise patient safety and welfare at all times.

2.2.2 Practise within generally accepted professional standards and regulatory expectations.

2.2.3 Ensure that all treatment methods are supported by appropriate clinical training, competency, and clinical justification.

2.2.4 Exercise professional judgement within the bounds of generally recognised standards of care.

2.2.5 Avoid engaging in higher risk treatment methods.

3 Generally Accepted Acupuncture Treatment Methods

3.1 Generally accepted treatment methods are those that are approved by the Board as being consistent with accepted standards of practice locally and are supported by established training pathways, competency expectations and/or widely accepted professional practice.

3.2 **Annex B contains the list of generally accepted acupuncture treatment methods that registered TCMPs are allowed to practise locally.** This list of acupuncture treatment methods will be reviewed by the Board from time to time to take into account new developments and evidence on the safety and efficacy of the acupuncture treatment methods whether stated within the list or otherwise.

4 Higher Risk Acupuncture Treatment Methods

4.1 Higher risk treatment methods are those that:

4.1.1 Pose an undue risk of patient harm or injuries such as burns, scarring and pose a higher risk of infection.

4.1.2 Lack sufficient evidence of safety and/or clinical efficacy or

4.1.3 Fall outside acceptable professional standards as determined by the Board.

4.2 The Board noted that certain acupuncture treatment methods may be covered in TCM reference textbooks published in other countries. However, where such treatment methods are not taught in the curriculum of locally accredited TCM schools and TCMPs have not been assessed for competency in these treatment methods through the Board's qualifying examinations for TCMPs' registration, these are considered by the Board to be higher risk procedures that can cause harm and injuries to patients such as burns, scarring and present a higher risk of infection. Accordingly, such procedures are not considered acceptable for practice within Singapore. The Board has identified and listed such acupuncture treatment methods in **Annex C**. TCMPs must avoid using such higher risk acupuncture treatment methods. **The list of what constitutes higher risk treatments is not exhaustive, and any new acupuncture treatment methods and use of novel equipment/devices, etc. that are**

not generally accepted/orthodox methods used by TCMPs in Singapore must also be avoided.

5 Acupuncture treatment needles

5.1 TCMPs are generally using conventional acupuncture needles such as filiform needle, plum-blossom needle, and three-edged needle in their treatments of patients. The Board has considered the feedback of the TCM community on the safe use of single-use blood lancets in bloodletting/pricking treatment and has allowed the use of blood lancets by TCMPs in bloodletting/pricking treatment of their patients.

5.2 However, it is important to note that TCMPs are not permitted to use hypodermic or injection needles for pricking or other TCM treatments. The use of hypodermic or injection needles is not included in the recognised training and clinical competencies for TCMPs, and TCMPs are therefore not trained or assessed in their use. The use of such needles in TCM treatment may also carry a higher risk of patient harm and complications compared with conventional acupuncture needles

6 Professional Responsibilities and Patient Safety

6.1 TCMPs are reminded of their responsibility to provide competent, compassionate, and appropriate medical care after an adequate assessment of the patient's condition through good history taking and appropriate TCM clinical examination, in accordance with the Ethical Code and Ethical Guidelines (ECEG) for TCMPs. Patient safety must remain the foremost consideration and TCMPs are expected to implement appropriate safeguards to prevent harm and to use only generally accepted acupuncture treatment methods in **Annex B**.

6.2 TCM Practitioners are responsible for ensuring that any equipment or medical devices used in acupuncture treatment are approved and have obtained the necessary licences or authorisations from the Health Sciences Authority (HSA), National Environment Agency (NEA), or other relevant authorities in Singapore, and that the use of such equipment or devices complies with all prevailing local regulations and guidelines. Where there is any uncertainty regarding the applicable requirements in the use of the equipment or medical

devices, practitioners should seek clarification directly from the relevant authorities before proceeding with the use of such equipment or medical devices.

6.3 TCM practitioners who use equipment or medical devices in support of their treatment or therapy must be appropriately trained and possess a clear understanding of the relevant dosage requirements where applicable, precautions, and contraindications prior to administering treatment.

6.4 All TCMPs are reminded to comply with the prevailing ECEG, General Advisory on Acupuncture and Other Related Treatment and the General Advisory on Good Clinical Practice and Infection Control for TCM Practice, which were issued by Ministry of Health and the Board. The Board takes a serious view of any transgressions of the ECEG and Advisories on TCM practice and will not hesitate to take the appropriate action(s) against such breaches by TCMPs.

Complaints Related to Acupuncture and Moxibustion Treatments

From 2016 to 30 September 2024, the Board received a total of 35 complaints cases, of which 20 cases (57%) were related to acupuncture and moxibustion treatments.

Of these 20 complaint cases received:

- a. 14 cases were on fire needling, fire cupping, moxibustion and heat lamp therapy, resulting in 13 cases of serious burn injuries¹ and 1 case of heavy nose bleeding;
- b. 2 cases were on failure to remove acupuncture needles after treatment;
- c. 3 cases were on bloodletting treatment causing serious infections, of which 1 case used an injection needle for bloodletting; and
- d. 1 case was on surgical thread embedding treatment causing injuries and pain (the Board recognised in this case that surgical thread embedding was not an approved method of TCM treatment).

¹ The data mentioned in this circular reflects data and statistics of official complaints that were lodged with the Board under the Traditional Chinese Medicine Practitioners Act 2000.

GENERALLY ACCEPTABLE ACUPUNCTURE TREATMENT METHODS

Acupuncture treatment methods	Brief Description
1. Needling treatment methods (针刺类疗法)	
Filiform needle acupuncture (毫针刺法)	Filiform needle acupuncture is a treatment method that stimulates acupuncture points, by manipulating filiform needles. The needles should not be heated for the treatment.
Dermal needling (皮肤针法)	Dermal needling is a treatment method that punctures certain areas of the body or acupuncture points using plum blossom needle, seven-star needle or arhat needle. The needles should not be heated for the treatment.
Pricking treatment using conventional acupuncture needles (使用常规针具(毫针、三棱针、采血针)的点刺法, 散刺法, 刺络法, 挑刺法)	Pricking treatment is a treatment method that punctures certain areas of the body or acupuncture points to induce bleeding using filiform needle or three-edged needle or lancet. The needles should not be heated for the treatment.
2. Cupping treatment methods (拔罐类疗法)	
Cupping (拔罐)	Cupping is a treatment method that induces local congestion or blood stasis on certain areas of the body, by attaching a cup to the skin surface through suction using negative pressure created by introducing flame into the cup or boiling the cup or by mechanical pump, with or without sliding the cup on the skin surface and/or flashing the cup on the skin surface.
Pricking-Cupping Therapy (刺络拔罐)	Pricking-Cupping Therapy is a treatment method that combines pricking treatment and cupping, in which certain areas of the body or acupuncture points are punctured to induce bleeding, and a cup is attached to the sites or points.
Cupping with needle retention (留针拔罐)	Cupping with needle retention is a treatment method that combines needle acupuncture and cupping, in which needles are inserted into acupuncture points and one or more of the retained needles are kept inside the attached cup.
3. Moxibustion and heat treatment methods (灸类疗法)	
Moxibustion (灸法)	Moxibustion is a treatment method that stimulates certain areas on the body surface through heat using ignited moxa, in the form of cone or stick, with or without a layer of medium including but not limited to ginger, garlic, salt and aconite

	patty (附子饼) . Ignited part of moxa must not directly contact the skin.
Far-infrared heat treatment (红外线热灯)	Far-infrared heat treatment is a treatment method that uses a far-infrared heat lamp to stimulate certain areas on the body with far-infrared heat.
Heat pad treatment (热垫治疗)	Heat pad treatment is a treatment method that uses a heat pad, with or without herbal medicine, to stimulate certain areas on the body.
4. Acupoint paste treatment methods (穴位贴敷疗法)	
Acupoint paste treatment (穴位贴敷法)	Acupoint paste treatment is a treatment method that stimulates acupoints through pasting raw or processed herbal medicine on the acupuncture points.
5. Electrical stimulation and laser acupuncture treatment methods (电与激光疗法)	
Electro-acupuncture (电针法)	Electro-acupuncture is a treatment method in which an electrical stimulator is connected to the needles after the needling sensation is obtained, and the sensation would be enhanced via impulsive current to the acupuncture points.
Transcutaneous Electrical Nerve Stimulation (TENS) (经皮电神经刺激)	Transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation (TENS) is a treatment method that uses low voltage electrical current to stimulate certain areas or acupuncture points on the body.
Laser acupuncture (激光针灸)	Laser acupuncture is a treatment method that uses nonthermal, non-ionising, low-intensity laser irradiation to stimulate certain areas or acupuncture points on the body.

Note: Refer to paragraphs 6.2 and 6.3 in this Advisory for additional guidance on the use of equipment or medical devices for acupuncture treatment.

HIGHER RISK ACUPUNCTURE TREATMENT METHODS

Acupuncture treatment methods	Brief Description
1. Needling treatment and other invasive methods (针刺及其他有创类疗法)	
Fire needling (火针) or other similar methods	Treatment is done by heating a needle till it is red hot and inserted into an acupuncture point or affected area.
Fu's subcutaneous needling (浮针) or other similar methods	Treatment is done by using a trocar needle to penetrate superficially and stimulate the subcutaneous layers of the area of nearby trigger points or taut tightened muscles.
Acupotomy (Including but not limited to 针刀技术、带刃针技术、水针刀技术、刃针技术、铍针技术) or other similar methods	Treatment is done by inserting a small needle-scalpel under the skin to break apart adhesions and muscle knots.
Intradermal needle therapy (皮内针法) also known as Needle-embedding therapy (埋针) or other similar methods	Treatment is done by inserting an intradermal needle into the outer layer of the skin for stimulation.
Acupoint catgut-embedding therapy (穴位埋线法) or other similar methods	Treatment is done by embedding catgut into the acupuncture point to create a stimulation.
Acupoint injection therapy (穴位注射法) or other similar methods	Treatment is done by injecting solution into the acupuncture point.
Methods using injection needle/hypodermic needle (注射针的应用)	Any treatment methods that use injection needle/hypodermic needle.
2. Moxibustion and heat treatment methods (灸类疗法)	
Rice grain moxibustion (麦粒灸) or other similar methods	Treatment involves small pieces of mug wort rolled to form very small, rice grain sized cones or threads which are placed directly onto acupuncture points or on the skin before lighting them.
Scarring moxibustion (瘢痕灸) or other similar methods	Treatment involves placing the burning moxa directly onto the skin.

<p>Pressing moxibustion (实按灸) including but not limited to The Great Monad Herbal Moxa Stick (太乙神针) & Thunder-Fire Herbal Moxa Stick (雷火神针) or other similar methods</p>	<p>Treatment is done by pressing the moxa stick, with or without prescribed herbs added in it, onto the skin which is covered with cloth or cotton paper.</p>
<p>Burning-rush moxibustion also known as Lamp moxibustion (灯火灸) or other similar methods</p>	<p>Treatment is done by lighting up oil-stained rush over the acupuncture point. A 'pop' sound is heard once it touches the skin.</p>
<p>Medicated thread moxibustion (药线灸、药线疗法) or other similar methods</p>	<p>Treatment is done by pressing burning medicated thread onto the skin.</p>
<p>Spreading Moxibustion (铺灸) or other similar methods</p>	<p>Treatment involves burning the moxa wools which are spread over a large area of the skin separated by a layer of medium including but not limited to herbs.</p>