

AA Interviews British Columbia's Minister of Health, George Abbott

AA: Kindly introduce yourself and describe your role within British Columbia's government.

GA: I am George Abbott, British Columbia's Minister of Health.

The Ministry of Health is responsible for British Columbia's publicly-funded health system. We have a mandate to guide and enhance the province's health services to ensure that British Columbians are supported in their efforts to maintain and improve their health.

In B.C., our provincial government sets overall health policy and funds physician services and prescription drug coverage, while our five regional health authorities have responsibility for actually managing and delivering health services, each for a different area of the province. These include acute (hospital) care, home health services, seniors care, and mental health and addictions services. A sixth health authority is responsible for province-wide health programs and services such as cancer treatment, transplant services, and the B.C. Children's Hospital.



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AA: What specific considerations led the Ministry of Health in B.C. toward extending acupuncture coverage to lower income populations there?

GA: Through the Ministry of Health, the B.C. government provides assistance with the premiums for our public health insurance program (the Medical Services Plan) for about 963,500 British Columbians living in households with a combined annual income of \$28,000 or less. Regular premiums range from \$54 per month for a single person up to \$108 for a family of three or more. Depending on income, these may be subsidized up to 100%.

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By extending this coverage to include acupuncture, we are focusing assistance where it is most needed. We want to ensure that lower income British Columbians have access to a variety of health services and that they have the ability to explore treatment options that they might otherwise be unable to afford.

British Columbians who are not eligible for premium assistance may have access to certain acupuncture therapies through their extended health benefits plans.

AA: Do you believe other provinces in Canada will follow the B.C. lead to extend insurance coverage for acupuncture to their populations?

GA: British Columbia is certainly leading the way in Canada by providing coverage for acupuncture therapies to our premium assistance patients, and I think the addition of this benefit is great for British Columbia and for our health system. I cannot speculate about what other provinces may do in terms of

their own scope of medical coverage, but in making this decision for our province we recognize that evidence indicates acupuncture is effective in treating a variety of medical conditions. We want to ensure that we present this option for more British Columbians.

AA: Have you encountered much opposition to this decision?

GA: We have received great positive feedback on our decision to include acupuncture as a premium assistance benefit – from the public and from the profession. Certainly the reaction of the acupuncture community has been overwhelmingly positive – this move is something practitioners have been advocating for quite some time.

AA: Do you envision an expansion of acupuncture coverage to other demographics in the population at a later date?

GA: We are continually looking for new and innovative ideas to support the health of British Columbians, and we hope that adding acupuncture as a supplementary Medical Services Plan benefit will help to increase awareness of acupuncture as a potential treatment method for a variety of medical conditions. We have no immediate plans to expand acupuncture coverage under the Medical Services Plan, but this option is one that we may examine in the future.

AA: Do you think acupuncture coverage will lessen other health care costs in B.C., potentially saving the Ministry of Health money?

GA: It is difficult to fully predict potential savings in health dollars as a result of the addition of this benefit. We recognize that acupuncture therapy certainly plays a complementary role in our health system, as do the other supplementary benefits that we cover for premium assistance patients. Our primary aim is to ensure that British Columbians have more options in terms of access and choice of effective health services.