Acupuncture in Australian general practice: patient characteristics

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Abstract:

Objective: To ascertain the incidence of acupuncture claims and the characteristics of patients claiming for acupuncture.

Design: Secondary analysis of Health Insurance Commission data on claims for acupuncture performed by a medical practitioner.

Participants: A summary of all Medicare acupuncture claims for financial years 1984-85 to 1996-97 and a random sample of patients claiming a Medicare rebate in calendar year 1996.

Main outcome measures: Claims for acupuncture by patients' State, sex, age, and the socioeconomic disadvantage index of patients' residences.

Results: Between 1984-85 and 1996-97 the number of acupuncture claims increased, but declined as a proportion of total Medicare claims. In 1996, 1.16% of patients claimed for acupuncture, which constituted 0.5% of all Medicare claims. Adjusting for age and socioeconomic disadvantage, women were more likely than men to claim for acupuncture (odds ratio, 1.40; 95% confidence interval, 1.36-1.45). This sex difference is proportionately greater than that for all medical services. Propensity to claim for acupuncture increased with age, peaking at 65-69 years, then declining. Acupuncture claims were more likely in areas just above those assessed as having the greatest social disadvantage.

Conclusion: The number of acupuncture claims has increased since 1984. As a proportion of all Medicare claims, acupuncture has remained stable since declining in 1991-92. This suggests that acupuncture is now an established complementary medical practice.