



## Revising Health Care Priorities: Is Reimbursement Imminent for “Alternative” Therapies?

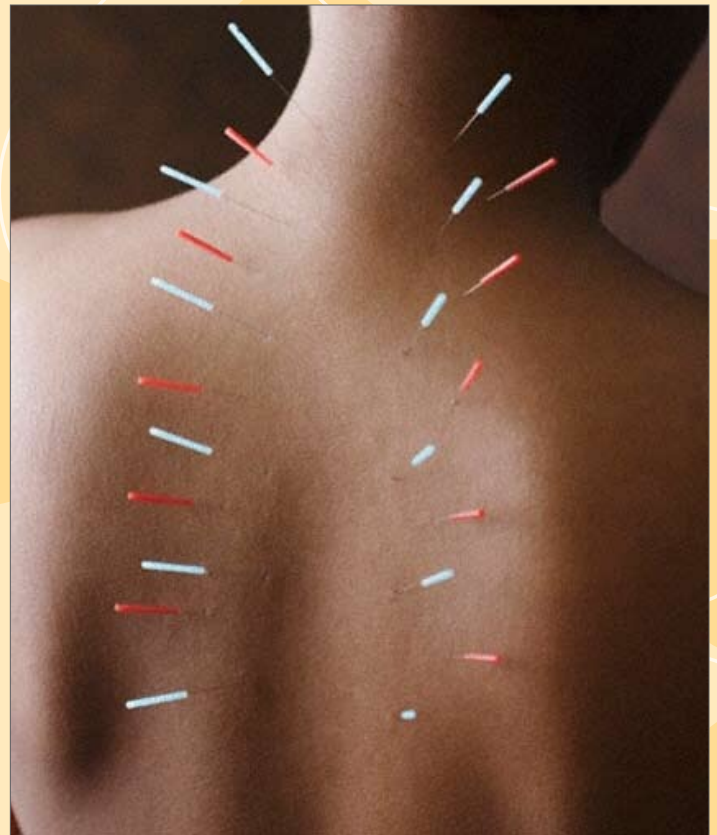
WASHINGTON - Naturopathic doctors, herbal healers, mind-body specialists, and acupuncturists often have been scorned by the US medical establishment, but growing numbers of Americans are seeking such care, and now an influential group of US senators believes the time has come to embrace an array of alternative therapies.

Senator Tom Harkin, an Iowa Democrat who is a longtime supporter of nontraditional medicine, is at the forefront of the effort to win insurance coverage for such providers as part of national healthcare legislation.

“It’s time to end the discrimination against alternative healthcare practices,” Harkin said at a congressional hearing.

Harkin is the cosponsor of an amendment that says healthcare plans will not be allowed to “discriminate” against any healthcare provider who has a license issued by a state, an amendment Senate aides said was designed to provide coverage for alternative medicine. Backers of the amendment say it could save tens of billions of dollars in the long run by providing less expensive and better alternatives to drugs and surgery in a variety of cases. The amendment was adopted by a Senate committee writing health legislation, but details are still being negotiated.

With hundreds of disciplines falling under the general category of alternative medicine, and with a variety of sometimes-conflicting studies about their effectiveness, there is much disagreement about the value of including



such providers in a national health insurance program.

State by state, there is a wide disparity of coverage of alternative medicine. For example, Massachusetts licenses acupuncturists, and many health insurance plans cover the service, but most do so only on a limited basis, by restricting the number of visits or the dollar amount of coverage.

Forty-four states license acupuncturists. Fifteen states, not including Massachusetts, license naturopathic physicians, who use natural remedies in their treatment. Many practitioners of alternative medicine say mainstream caregivers don’t want the competition.