

Acupuncture career offers many rewards

By **FRAN GARDNER**

SPECIAL WRITER

Employer: Brenda Harris
Acupuncture

Salary: \$60 to \$80 an hour gross; \$15,000 to \$60,000 annually depending on experience and hours worked.

Training: Brenda Harris studied speech/communication and pre-medicine in her undergraduate years at the University of Washington. But her interest in nutrition led her to consider other paths.

"I was originally interested in naturopathic medicine, and from there found Chinese medicine and fell totally in love with it," she says.

She studied at Bastyr University in Seattle for two years and then transferred to the National College of Natural Medicine

On the job

(when it was called the National College of Naturopathic Medicine) in Portland for another four years.

She has a master's degree in science and oriental medicine and is licensed by the Oregon Medical Board as an acupuncturist.

Acupuncturists insert the tips of fine, disposable needles into specific points of the body to treat various conditions. They might also use massage, and movement techniques such as qigong.

Many, including Harris, are knowledgeable in Chinese herbs and might give dietary advice. "At my school," Harris says, "herbs were part of the program and you couldn't finish without studying the herbs."

Chinese herbal practice is based on the individual, and herbs are blended based on observations, such as the conditions of the person's tongue and pulse.

"The real beauty is that you can tailor it specifically to that person," Harris says. For example, two people with high blood pressure may get two different formulas "based on everything that's behind that particular symptom or why that symptom is presenting."

Some acupuncturists stick with acupuncture and don't work with herbs, Harris says, but about 80 percent do both.

After she graduated in 2004, Harris started a clinic, Golden Needle Acupuncture, with two other Chinese-medicine practitioners. This March, she split off to form her own practice.

Data gathered by NCNM indicates that about 75 percent of its graduates work in private practice rather than in groups.

Dr. Laurie Regan, dean of Classical Chinese Medicine at NCNM, notes that her program is one of the few schools of Oriental medicine that requires a bachelor's for admission.

But, she adds, while students need to know subjects such as chemistry and biology, her school strongly urges people with liberal arts degrees to apply.

"The medicine is so full of symbolism that people of very different backgrounds can be



JOHN M. VINCENT

Brenda Harris operates her own acupuncture clinic.

drawn to do this medicine," she says.

She says the school has been seeing more students come directly from undergraduate school, "but always there are people who are making career changes."

Best part: "Connecting with people," Harris says, "is very special. . . . You're sort of empowering people, increasing something good in people. That's very satisfying: helping people to be healthy, be in touch with their body, just be a healthier person. . . . Being with patients can actually provide energy for the provider also, so after seeing patients I feel more energetic."

"It's also great combined with Western medicine," she adds, "and also, the beauty of Chinese medicine is that it's very broad, so it can be preventive, focusing on health versus disease, so you do it in order to not get sick."

Challenges: "It's hard to say," Harris says. "It's one of those professions where you're doing what you love, so there's not a lot of downside, actually."

Future: Portland has a high number of acupuncturists, Harris says. "There are two great acupuncture schools here, so a lot of people come, and they fall in love with Portland, of course, and end up practicing here."

"More and more clinics are being open to having acupuncturists in their space, and slowly even hospitals," she says, so "the job market is probably going to be expanding."

Regan, the NCNM dean, agrees that the market is not yet saturated. She says there's a need for more in certain areas, such as towns where no one is practicing acupuncture.

Have an idea for the Jobs section? Contact Fran Gardner at fran@hevanet.com.