



HOLISTIC MEDICINE

Ayurveda gets the nod from the Swiss government

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Ayurveda's popularity in spas has contributed to it being regarded as a wellness treat rather than a medicine system

(Keystone)

Practitioners of traditional Indian medicine Ayurveda will soon be able to get a federally recognised national diploma after passing an exam. They hope this move will bring credibility, especially in the eyes of health insurance providers.

Prior to the approval of the national exam and diploma, Ayurveda lacked official recognition in Switzerland unlike other complementary and alternative medicine practices.

"Training institutes and schools offer diplomas but they are not officially recognised," Catherine Goodman Zosso, vice president of the Swiss Professional Association for Ayurveda Practitioners and Therapists (VSAMT), told swissinfo.ch.

She believes that one of the main reasons for Ayurveda's failure to be taken seriously by the authorities is that it is associated more with "wellness" than with medicine.

"Many hotels offer Ayurveda massages as a part of their spa packages and in the early days

most Ayurveda practitioners had minimal qualifications and experience,” she says.

As a result of this lack of credibility and recognition, most health insurers refuse to reimburse patients for the cost of Ayurveda consultations, including those with supplementary coverage for alternative therapies.

“I have been practising in Switzerland for over ten years but have only been recognised by insurers for two years,” Bern-based Ayurveda therapist Krishnan Binu told swissinfo.ch. “Most insurers do not reimburse patients for Ayurveda treatments.”

This means patients have to dip into their own pockets if they want to avail of an Ayurvedic consultation.

Lobbying authorities

After being rejected in 2005 by the authorities for lack of scientific proof of their efficacy, complementary and alternative medicines made a comeback in 2009 when two-thirds of Swiss backed their inclusion on the constitutional list of paid health services.

As a result of the vote, five alternative therapies – homeopathy, holistic, herbal and neural therapies and traditional Chinese medicine – were included under the basic health insurance package on a trial basis from 2012 to 2017, provided they are administered by certified medical doctors.

Despite efforts to lobby the government, Ayurveda was not included among them.

“The authorities asked us to wait until the trial period for these five therapies was over before demanding the inclusion of Ayurveda,” Franz Rutz, president of VSAMT and one of the main leaders of the people’s initiative, told swissinfo.ch.

Instead, the association concentrated on preparing Ayurveda for inclusion among the disciplines eligible for the national diploma. This would allow practitioners without a medical degree to receive an official professional qualification and pave the way for Ayurveda’s recognition by the health insurance industry.

Steps taken included clearly differentiating Ayurveda medicine from Ayurvedic massage and categorising the practitioners on the basis of their expertise, experience and qualifications along the lines set out by the national exam requirements.

Their efforts paid off when Ayurveda was officially approved as one of four therapies – including Chinese and European traditional medicine, as well as homeopathy – for the national diploma by the State Secretariat for Education Research and Innovation (SERI).

“The Ayurveda groups were very active in the public consultation,” says Nicole Aeby-Egger, who is in charge of professional training at SERI.

Road ahead

The first exams are expected to be held in November and applicants will first have to pass a series of six pre-exams. However, those with recognised qualifications and at least five years of experience could be exempt from the pre-exams. The exam is also open to foreign nationals but will only be offered in German, French and Italian.

Besides benefiting the 2,500 alternative medicine therapists in Switzerland, the national diploma is also seen as a victory for patients who put their trust in alternative medicine.

“Patients can soon go to a professional who has passed these exams instead of someone who has done a weekend course,” Rudolf Happle, secretary general of the Organisation of Swiss alternative medicine professionals, told swissinfo.ch.

According to him, the government will maintain a list of practitioners who have obtained the diploma and it is planned that the list will be available on the internet for verification.

India-trained Binu hopes that the national diploma will make Swiss health insurers more receptive to Ayurveda. Rutz, who is heading the Ayurveda lobbying effort, is optimistic.

“We are currently in talks with major health insurers to recognise those who pass these exams,” he says. “So far, we’ve received a positive response from them.”

According to Rutz, the next big challenge is ensuring that practitioners who obtain the national diploma have the right to prescribe Ayurvedic medicines and food supplements. Currently, patients can buy them only from pharmacies due to quality control issues. The Swiss regulations on therapeutic products are currently being revised by the Swiss parliament and Ayurveda practitioners are hoping for yet another reason to celebrate.

Ayurveda

Ayurveda is a form of traditional medicine that originated in India thousands of years ago. Its name comes from the Sanskrit term for “knowledge of life” and its practitioners strive to treat the cause of an illness rather than its symptoms.

Using primarily herbal medicines, Ayurveda combines preventive health care, healing and a healthy life philosophy. Treatments can include long-term detoxification programmes as well as quicker pick-me-ups, like oil massages designed to rejuvenate.

Alternative medicine recognition

Homeopathy, holistic medicine, herbal medicine, neural therapy and traditional Chinese medicine are currently recognised by the government during a six-year trial period from 2012-2017. These treatments are covered by basic compulsory insurance until 2017, provided they are administered by a certified medical professional.

Ayurveda and European traditional medicine, as well as homeopathy and traditional Chinese medicine, have been approved for a national diploma examination. Currently these treatments are covered by a supplementary insurance scheme (an additional insurance policy that many Swiss hold to cover costs of complementary and alternative health treatments) if administered by a practitioner who is not a certified medical professional. However, not all insurers recognise these medicine systems.

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