

The Best of Everything

We live in an intensively competitive society. Everything we do and see seems to be a contest, from the recent presidential elections to the Super Bowl. This is especially true in the world of medicine. As different forms of care emerge and grow, so does the level of competition. Doctors compete with one another to have their articles published in peer-reviewed journals, which earns them prestige and recognition. Hospitals compete to utilize the latest advances in technology and have the cleanest facilities.

Today, it is not enough just to be good at what you do. You have to put more of an effort into your practice and try to be the best provider possible. What is the prize for being the best? For an acupuncturist, the prize can mean a thriving practice; a larger patient base; respect from your peers; etc.

How do you reach this prize, and what elements go into being the best acupuncture practitioner?

One of the traditions of the Chinese new year is to thoroughly clean the house. This tradition can extend to your office as well. The day before the new year begins, sweep out the old and make way for a new and bright beginning. When you go into your office this week, look at it with new eyes. Instead of looking at your office from the doctor's perspective, look at it as if you were a patient.

Sit down in the reception room and write down what you see. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Are there any plants in the offices? Are they fresh-looking and healthy?
- Do you have any magazines for your patients to read? Are the magazines current and in good condition, or are they old and ratty?
- Is there enough furniture for your patients to sit down? Is the furniture clean? Is it comfortable?
- What does the floor look like? Has it been vacuumed or swept? If it has a carpet or welcome mat, is it clean?
- Does your reception area have windows? If so, are they clean?
- When you walk up to the receptionist, is there a business card holder on the front counter? Do the business cards contain all the necessary information for patients to contact you?
- Do you have any brochures or pamphlets about acupuncture and Oriental medicine in the reception area?
- Do you have any other information patients can take home or share with friends and family?

These are all factors you must consider if you want to become the best practitioner possible. Remember, the chances of a patient becoming a repeat customer or referring other patients to you are based not only on the way you deliver care, but also on that patient's first impression of your office.

Now that you've spent time looking around the office, it's time to start listening to the way your practice is run. While sitting in the reception area, listen to the sounds of your office:

- Can you hear the phones ring in the reception room? Does the noise bother you?
- Does the office have music playing in the background, or a television in the reception room?

Is the music or sound from the television too loud?

- Can you hear the office staff talk to each other while you're waiting in the reception room?
- When a patient comes into your office, does the receptionist greet him or her by name? Are patients greeted at all?
- What about outside sources? Can you hear the sounds of nearby traffic or noises coming from other businesses?

Another way to utilize your listening skills is to pretend you're a new patient and make a call to your office. You might be surprised at what you hear. Here are some things to look for:

- How long did the phone ring before it was answered?
- When the receptionist answered the phone, was she pleasant and friendly? Did she answer by saying "Hello" or "Good morning"? Did she mention the name of the practice in her greeting?
- Was the receptionist able to answer all your questions?
- Did the receptionist hesitate when she answered, or did she seem pretty knowledgeable about acupuncture and Oriental medicine?
- Was the receptionist helpful?
- If the receptionist was unable to answer the phone, did an answering machine pick up the call so you could leave a message?

Answering and managing phone calls is an important aspect of any practice. If calls are answered promptly and handled professionally, patients are more likely to keep appointments and refer more patients to you. If calls are not answered in a timely fashion, or if the receptionist does not act professionally, it reflects poorly on your practice and could lead to fewer referrals and repeat patients. If there are too many calls, resolve to correct this by hiring someone to help. One acupuncturist told me she hired an assistant to answer the phone and make appointments. When the assistant is there, services are rendered more easily; according to her, the entire practice takes on a different feeling.

One sense we haven't discussed yet, but which is just as important as sight and hearing, is smell. Ask yourself:

- What is the first thing you smell when you walk into the office? Is it pleasing? Is it offensive?
- Are there any fumes or trails of smoke in the reception area?
- Is the office well-ventilated?

These smells are an important issue because of the impression they can have on new patients. If a patient walks into the office for the first time and smells something unfamiliar or malodorous, it could lead to a negative experience for that patient. Smell is also important for your recurrent patients and staff; it is vital that they receive good ventilation and experience pleasing odors while waiting for treatment.

The two other senses to examine are feel and taste. While you can't literally "taste" your office, you can get a good idea of its "feeling" by walking around and experiencing the way the practice is run. In doing so, you can begin to discern which areas your practice is proficient in and which areas need help. Go with your instincts. If something doesn't "feel" or "taste" right, chances are it isn't. You can use these steps to determine what keeps your practice from being the best, then address those needs when the time is right.

This process of inspecting your office is called five-sensing. It is something I highly recommend each practitioner do at least once a year. To be the best, you must pay close attention to details. You must be aware of your office environment; your personal appearance; your staff's appearance; and the way you interact with patients. Examining these areas and improving the way things are

done helps create an atmosphere of excellence. Most important, it will help you to achieve harmony in the office and create the practice of your dreams.

MARCH 2001