

Why Acupuncture? A Student's Perspective

David Razo

As I sat down on a sun-faded beach and gazed across the dry rock bed on campus, I reflected on a few intersecting experiences that, as a student, have prompted me to ask, "Why acupuncture?" I wasn't having second thoughts about my chosen profession; just the opposite, in fact. I thought about the times I have encountered prejudice against acupuncture; my struggles as a student in other disciplines; and my lack of professional and personal fulfillment, all of which merely reaffirmed why I wanted to become an acupuncturist in the first place.

Earlier this year, something occurred that made my decision to pursue this path all the more clear. In January, my father was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma: a single mass that appeared on an MRI the size of a football, located on the aorta, just behind the stomach. The cancer had grown at an alarming rate in a short amount of time, initially revealing itself with nothing more than flu-like symptoms. My father began chemotherapy and was soon plagued by rapid weight loss, pain and depression; his body began purging fluid. I watched as this once healthy and active man began withering away. I'd never seen him in such a state of depression and despair, and his shattered spirits troubled me.

As a fourth-term student at the time, I was familiar with the power of acupuncture in treating cancer. Although the technological advances of conventional medicine have come far and have started to bridge gaps in cancer treatment, allopathic doctors need to consider more options. Acupuncture should be one of those options. I saw these gaps in my father's health care, too.

One quiet afternoon, I enthusiastically suggested to my parents that my father might benefit from acupuncture as an adjunct treatment. I explained acupuncture treatment options to him in Western concepts, because I knew TCM terminology would have repelled his already fogged brain. His response was (understandably) one of disbelief and distrust in a health care system with which he was unfamiliar. My mother, a nurse, was constantly searching for ways to relieve my father's pain, and encouraged him to give acupuncture a try (maybe, partially, because I was her son, but more likely because she wasn't the one who would have to be inserted with needles). I studied my father's reaction to my suggestion: His forehead wrinkled, and I couldn't help but see creases on the *yangming*, *bitong*, *dicang* (ST 4) and *yingxiang* (LI 20), a few points we had covered in class the night before. He slowly rotated his head toward the floor and chuckled with disdain. I understood. He comes from a different era. (Heck, he still has a difficult time paging me, and sometimes can't even operate a remote control!)

That's when it occurred to me that educating people is going to have to be a crucial part of practicing acupuncture. Acupuncture is still mysterious to many; we need to break the myth that acupuncture is "voodoo science" and demonstrate how it can benefit anyone for any reason.

Personally, I'd experienced plenty of stress, both personal and professional, before deciding to embark on a career in acupuncture and Oriental medicine. As a massage therapist and bodyworker for more than 10 years, I saw patients in excruciating pain, some of whom had their lives ruined and families torn apart because of their deteriorated health. For these people, conventional medicine had no answers, and bodywork wasn't enough. Although I loved bodywork, I knew it was

not going to be my final destination. I was familiar with acupuncture's mysterious benefits from my years in the alternative health field. I understood that acupuncture would create an effective combination that would provide more options to my patients. I needed to be in the healing arts, because I wanted to give my patients more.

Shortly after I got married, I decided to pursue a master's degree in acupuncture. I enrolled at the Southern California University of Health Sciences (SCUHS) and took on a full course load. Thank goodness I'd been able to pay off my credit card debt a few months earlier, because now I was on a new mission - one that cost five figures. Still, as I began my schooling, I found many reasons why acupuncture was a potential hazard: There aren't many health insurance plans that cover acupuncture treatment, and insurers that do reimburse, do so minimally. Even health insurance that covers, say, 25 visits a year might help in treating a few ailments, but what about long-term, preventive care? Despite its "hazards," I chose acupuncture as a profession so I could help others, and the lack of purpose and personal fulfillment that had continuously plagued me before I became a student of acupuncture is now dissipating.

I find it exciting when I observe patients at the university's health center and see their health restored through the use of acupuncture and herbs. Maybe I am an overzealous student with a beginner's idealism, but so be it.

Thankfully, acupuncture is entering the mainstream - but our work is just beginning. With continued research and education, the ancient wisdom of acupuncture will continue to be confirmed and accepted as an effective practice. With continued efforts to educate the community, prejudicial views of Oriental medicine will dissolve, and what was once considered mysterious and unknown will become understood and accepted. The important part is for us in the profession to stay positive and motivated, and keep spreading the word.

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