

Acupuncturists and Archivists: A Tale of Two Professions

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I am an acupuncture patient. For more than two years, I have found relief from a chronic medical condition through an acupuncturist's skillful placement of needles. I also am an archivist. I manage a 3,500-linear-foot collection of historic manuscripts and institutional records at a public university in Wisconsin. One would think that acupuncturists and archivists have little in common, other than professional titles that begin with the letter "A" and a shared love of ancient, or at least old, knowledge. Upon further reflection, however, it is apparent that the two professions share a great deal, such as:

- Acupuncture and archival science constitute small professional groups. It might surprise you to learn that acupuncturists outnumber archivists in the United States. There are an estimated 18,000 practicing acupuncturists; current membership in the Society of American Archivists (SAA) is somewhere around 5,000.
- Acupuncturists and archivists have been slow to professionalize. Consider professional standards for a moment. *Acupuncture Today* reported in its December 2006 issue that WHO-mediated talks recently have generated globally standardized locations for 361 acupuncture points. Only two years ago, the SAA endorsed a content standard for formal descriptions of archival collections. Both professions' counterparts in Western anatomical science and library science began developing their comparable standards in the 19th century.
- Practitioners with little training frequently perform our work. Physicians and chiropractors practicing acupuncture have their equivalents in the archival world. They're called museum curators, librarians, local historians, kindly retired volunteers and history majors who couldn't find more lucrative work after graduation.
- Perhaps as a result of the aforementioned, both acupuncturists and archivists are misunderstood and marginalized. Those who see the results of our work tell us we have "the best jobs in the world," without considering the realities of clinic or repository management. We struggle for recognition of our interests in state and federal legislation. We both have to cope with HIPAA regulations, even though they weren't formulated with our professions in mind.

But of greatest interest, I think, are the similarities between acupuncturists' and archivists' struggles with professional identity. Both professions function within broken systems and both prefer to overlook the role their professional ideals and expectations play in the broken systems. Allow me to briefly explain how this works in the archival world.

We archivists have described our situation as a "cycle of poverty."¹ More often than not, we don't have the money, the staff or the institutional support to practice our trade as the textbooks dictate. We struggle to keep up with our burgeoning backlogs of unprocessed records. When researchers require information from the archives, we often disappoint them - the records aren't ready for use, we don't have the time to search, or we simply can't find what they need. As a result, resource allocators do not bestow archives with generous sums of money. Why would they? We're the people who sit in messy rooms packed with dusty boxes who can't find anything. And so, the cycle

continues.

It's tempting to whine about our lot, but it is much more productive to examine our role in perpetuating this cycle of poverty.² We are not innocent bystanders victimized by institutional bureaucracies, but rather professionals who have failed to understand the essence of our own livelihood. Our professional image has centered entirely too much on the craft of our profession.³ While striving for the perfect arrangement and description of an archival collection or the exhaustive institutional history to accompany a set of records, we forgot all about archives users and their need to access records in an efficient and timely manner.

I attribute this oversight to our professional egos. After all, who wants to grow up to be an administrator? But that's what effective archivists are. When I entered the profession, I aspired to be all kinds of things - a public historian, a conservator of fragile documents, a local history expert. Several years in the profession, however, have taught me that I need to be a plain old administrator. It's not glamorous, but it is useful to researchers. Being an administrator enables me to make decisions that are good for me and for my archives users. Being anything more exotic - a historian, a scholar, a possessor of arcane knowledge about paper conservation - benefits only my ego in a most superficial way.

Now, let's return to the acupuncture profession. Acupuncture publications and professional Web sites contain far too much unproductive rumination about the nature of the acupuncture profession: What does it mean to be a healer? Are acupuncturists TCM masters, spiritual guides or doctors? Or, are they all three in one? And how should acupuncturists compete and compare with chiropractors, allopathic and osteopathic physicians, naturopaths and other medical practitioners?

Please don't misunderstand me - I do think it is useful to think about one's profession. But, in the case of acupuncturists, as in the case of archivists, I think much of this discussion is clouded by egoism. The terms "healer," "master" and "doctor" almost always are juxtaposed against a professional status that is as unglamorous as administrator - technician. What fuels acupuncturists' dislike of this term? The *American Heritage Dictionary* definition reads as follows: "An expert in a technique, as: (a) One whose occupation requires training in a specific technical process (b) One who is known for skill in an intellectual or artistic technique."⁴ Are acupuncturists not technicians?

Clearly, acupuncturists' resistance to being technicians has less to do with the definition of the term than its associations. I'll say what many of you may be thinking: Technicians are people who attend community colleges and possess less social and economic clout than other professionals. Yet everybody has technicians in their lives, ranging from hairstylists and barbers to auto mechanics and appliance repair people. Technicians are indispensable. The ones who are not thoughtful about their work are the ones we do not recommend to our friends and families. Those who are thoughtful not only win our trust and gratitude, but also make a pretty good living.

As an acupuncture patient, I ask all acupuncturists to reflect upon their professional identity. Does it serve you well? Does it serve your patients well? Do your professional ideals allow you to be truly useful to those who need your services, or are they contributing to the broken health care system? Are your expectations of a Cadillac practice thwarting your efforts to make a living? Please think about it. Since I demoted myself to administrator status, my researchers and I are happier and more productive. If it worked for an archivist, it just might work for an acupuncturist, too.

References

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