

Say What?

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I recently took my dog Maggie to the vet for her checkup and shots. (No, we are not going into the debate on vaccinations) The visit was business as usual until the time came for the heartworm blood sample. Let's just say Maggie didn't like that. The vet had called in an assistant to help hold Maggie. When Maggie yelped and jumped with the needle stick, the assistant noted: "Oh look, she expressed her anal glands." Say WHAT???

I have had dogs for a long time, so I know what the assistant was talking about. For those of you without pets, here's the scoop: All predators, whether they are canines or felines in the wild or skunks in your backyard, have anal glands. They just use them differently. Skunks discharge the secretion from these glands as a form of defense, while dogs use it primarily for territorial marking or as a form of communication. In dogs and cats, every time a stool is passed, it puts enough pressure on the anal glands that some of the secretion is deposited on the surface of the stool. Other dogs and cats are then able to tell who has been in the neighborhood just by sniffing the stools they find. Additionally, dogs and cats recognize each other by smelling in the general area of the anus. Each animal's anal glands produce a [unique scent](#).¹ Sometimes, when scared or startled, domesticated animals will discharge these glands, much like a visceral fright reflex.

So what does this have to do with acupuncture? My point is: "communication." Use words people understand. As health care providers, we have a vocabulary that we use. We know what we are talking about. Joe Public does not. Words like *meridian* and *liver qi* are not in the common person's vocabulary. I have heard many practice-management speakers over the years talk about being an effective communicator. "People don't care what you know. They want to know how much you care." Big fancy words don't impress patients. Your ability to relate to them and help them do. Speak on their level. Take the time to explain your treatment and plan of care.

Granted, we are health care professionals. There is a time for professional language and dialogue. Choose the time and be aware of to whom you are speaking. [As I have written before](#), we are health care providers and we have a professional and legal responsibility to document care provided. It doesn't matter whether you are a practitioner of TCM, Korean hand therapy, meridian balancing, reflexology or some other technique. It is your professional responsibility to document what you find, what you plan to do and how you treated the patient. Whether you like it or not, your treatment notes will be looked at by a medical physician, insurance company or attorney at some point in time.² Your notes must be clean, clear and legible. With this understanding, use professional vocabulary when appropriate.

Most people who walk through your front door come in with a set of expectations. They saw a documentary on TV or they read an article in *People* magazine. My favorite is: "Oprah said..." They have a mental picture of someone who is going to reach down and cure them with a miraculous touch. We know that doesn't always happen. Unfortunately, we are not always the first health care provider a patient has seen. Many of them have been through many painful and/or embarrassing tests. They have consulted with medical professionals who can often be cold or dismissive towards

them. They have been given "diagnoses" they don't properly understand. These patients need someone who can sit down and explain to them what is going on in a way they can understand. Speaking to a patient using big words they don't understand only leads to frustration and disappointment.

At the vet, I did not care that the assistant knew big words. I was only there to take care of my dog. At that moment, she was scared. I didn't need someone spouting off professional jargon to impress me, and neither did Maggie. After the visit, Maggie was more interested in playing with the friendly receptionist who got down and petted her than in the assistant with the big vocabulary. Don't leave your patients thinking "Say What?" Be a real person. Speak to them on their level. It might seem like a small thing, but it can make a big difference. When you talk to people at their level, it makes you approachable, it makes you an ally, it makes you a friend.

References

1. www.peteducation.com.
2. www.chiroweb.com/mpacms/dc/article.php?id=51375.

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