

## Your Most Important Job

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I am overly enthusiastic about acupuncture. I have been giving treatments for around 12 years now, some good and some not so great, but I still believe that if I was just clever enough, I could figure out a magic point combination to cure every disease and bring world peace. I still think acupuncture is magic, even though I know better. I have also learned a few inconvenient facts about practicing acupuncture in America that make it a whole other ball game than treating 14th-century Mongolians.

One is that Americans are artificial life forms. While we weren't looking, someone transformed us from natural creatures living according to the cycles of our planet, to cyborgs. We are often yanked out of the womb according to the obstetrician's golf-schedule and then promptly pumped full of toxic vaccines and fed sugar water with added vitamins (and BPA from the plastic bottle) until we can eat, when we enjoy irradiated, genetically modified mutant food.

As children, our internal clocks are set to 50-minute intervals by school bells and to half-hour cartoons. Cell phones, TVs and iPods tune our brainwaves to weird frequencies, and our very cells are invaded by X-ray, magnetic and ultrasonic radiation. When the symptoms from all this abuse start to appear, we move on to drugs, dialysis, pacemakers, stents and various other plastic internal accessories, and your basic internal amputations like hysterectomies and tonsillectomies. For fun, we might hurtle ourselves through the atmosphere at 600 mph on a jet or sit motionless for hours staring at a plastic box. Compared to this, Chinese medicine evolved on another planet. No wonder it doesn't work sometimes.

The second problem is that Americans don't understand the first thing about Chinese medicine. Even my own family gave me a rubber chicken and voodoo doll when I graduated, which explains a lot. Being an acupuncturist in America is kind of like being a car salesman in 14th-century Mongolia; no one had ever even seen a road, let alone knows what a car was or what it did. People who live the lifestyle I described above do not have time for the healing process. They want to buy instant health in a bottle and wouldn't know what preventive medicine was if it dropped on their heads.

I recently watched a documentary about the Dali Lama's doctor, Dr. Tenzin Choedrak. He was treating some Buddhist nuns, one of whom had survived brutal torture in a Chinese prison. After about seven months of treatment, he told her that it was going to take a long time for her to heal. She nodded in understanding. This was a good wake-up call for me. People always want to know how fast I can make them better. These are the people I described above. If Dr. Choedrak, one of the very top Asian medical doctors in the world, says it will take time, who am I to rush it? Maybe time is the "vitamin" that Americans need most in their healing processes.

The third problem, is that we are opposed by the most powerful people in the world. Chemical companies, hospitals, drug companies and med schools all one big, happy family who want to own every American patient, their diseases and all their records, and every word in the dictionary related to healing. In case you missed it, free speech no longer applies to medicine in America

unless you belong to the "family." For example, traditional Asian medicine is a complete medical system with a 5,000-year history of success. Asthma is a minor thing to treat with TCM. Since I can't use the word *cure*, I guess I will have to just say that I have enabled my asthma patients to discontinue their pharmaceutical therapy and normalize their breathing, often to the utter shock of their doctors. Ridiculous.

The only reason we are still here is because there is a relatively big demand for us. The only thing that trumps unlimited political power and money is crowds of pissed-off peasants. So for now, they grant us a meager, dwindling existence. I don't take insurance, but I hear coverage is less available than ever.

My practice is busy; I'm not whining about that. I just find that I sometimes feel like I was dumped in Poland and I only speak French. Until our fellow Americans understand what we do at the most basic level, and that it is (in my humble opinion) the best treatment available in the world, they will not be capable of understanding how much blood and sweat we put into learning our profession, let alone appreciate the time and money involved in earning a doctorate. If you materialized in front of our Mongolian friend's 14th-century house with a Lamborghini, you could spend days explaining how it was built and what it was made of. You might get, at best, a shrug (if he didn't run off screaming). It's not even big enough to keep chickens in.

Therefore, I think the hands-down most important job we have as a profession is to keep hammering away at education. New Zealand and the United States are the only two industrialized countries that allow drug advertising. Look at how much exposure people are getting daily to drug ads now. Have you noticed that your patients are more conversant in drug-speak than ever before? Do you think it's a good thing that drug companies are constantly hammering away at us all to "Ask your doctor about Stonedouttaurmind. Side effects include utter incoherence and systemic necrosis?" Hey, it works for them. We need to look for opportunities to educate, as well. Since we don't have any money, we must get creative.

I write a popular newsletter for my patients and for local distribution, and I also write a natural health column for the local newspaper. My one and only acupuncture article for them has been the most popular so far. I try to keep understandable material on hand because I am a writer, not a speaker, and can get tangled up in my own ridiculous blather if I try to explain a complicated issue in 10 seconds or less. I never dreamed my little efforts would get people in my small, conservative Northwestern town talking about natural medicine, but they are. Almost daily, someone will tell me how much they liked my article, and that makes it worth all the work.

Maybe you are a speaker. Do you like to talk to people? Volunteer at the food bank or the local pet rescue, or just hang out at the local coffee shop, and always be sure to wear an acupuncture T-shirt. Keep cards and brochures in your car. Design your own radio show and propose it to some local stations. Do you have charisma? How about public TV? I've even done high school career fairs.

There are some really terrific books available on guerilla advertising. Most of it is fun, creative and cheap. Don't be your town's best-kept secret. I used to never leave my house without a name tag stuck to my front that said, "Hi! I'm Julie Crist, professional acupuncturist." Sure, I felt stupid. So what? It worked great.

From 1993 to 2003, medical costs doubled with worse outcomes. People are ready for a change. We are the best that medicine has to offer.

