

The Heart of Healing - Patient Care

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In the field of practice management, perhaps the single most important skill and area of expertise is patient care. You may have studied with the "masters," be well organized, in practice for all the "right" reasons, and have created a beautiful and harmonious environment, but if your communication, interpersonal and/or management skills are lacking, you may find it challenging to reach your goals. Today I will share some ideas and techniques that may assist you in developing superb patient care and mastering the "heart of healing."

As a health-care practitioner, you will consult with patients on many issues affecting their well-being. You will guide them in tuning in to their rhythm and embracing their healing journey. As you focus your awareness on the responsibilities inherent in your role as therapist, begin by recalling the positive and negative experiences you have had as a patient.

I remember receiving medical care after little or no explanation, which felt invasive. In contrast, I have had empowering experiences in which I was listened to and then invited to participate in the decisions about my health care. In your experience, what has a doctor or practitioner done that has inspired your confidence? Helped you to feel comfortable? Made you feel ill at ease or unsure about the recommended treatment? Allow your experiences as a patient to help guide you in your efforts to offer your patients the best possible support.

There are many dimensions and approaches to patient care. They are as diverse as the styles of acupuncture and Oriental medicine (AOM), and may be influenced by your culture, philosophy and interpersonal skills. Patient education is perhaps the most critical. Before you tackle the task of informing and educating your patients, you must glean several important things from them. Begin by finding out what their expectations are. After introductions, my first questions often are, "How can I help you?" and "What are your goals for treatment?" By discovering a patient's treatment goals, you can more easily lend your guidance and support. Partner with your patients to help them achieve their goals.

Most new patients are concerned about whether acupuncture treatment will be painful, and what the experience will feel like. Although you may have your patients sign an informed consent form, it is advisable to take as much time as needed for each patient to be comfortable prior to receiving treatment. Explain clearly what you will be doing, how it might feel, and what sort of response is common. Discover whether new patients may have already tried acupuncture, and have them describe their experience(s) to you. Be sure to find out what their positive and/or negative responses have been. These can help guide you to be more sensitive to their needs.

Through discussing how AOM works, and its healing paradigm, you will encourage active participation in the healing process and compliance with your recommended treatment. For example, if your patients understand why taking herbal medicine three times a day or practicing *qigong* at home can

support their health, they will be more likely to take responsibility for their healing through active participation.

Be sure to take time to talk about what kinds of conditions you feel confident in treating, as your patient may seek your help for a specific issue, never suspecting that in fact you may be able to address other concerns as well. In addition, by explaining how AOM supports optimum wellness, your patient may think of a friend, co-worker or family member that also might benefit from your care. Thus, through patient education, you may be able to provide needed support and cultivate new referrals.

If you routinely prescribe herbal medicine, it is advisable to give clear instructions in writing after explaining what you have prescribed, why you have prescribed it, and how to take it. I often find that without written instructions, patients may not comply with recommended dosages. In addition, they will often phone my office to ask me to repeat the verbal instructions. Therefore, for both safety and efficiency, write down your prescriptive instructions, and remember to keep a copy in the patient file.

Your patients may be too relaxed after treatment to remember detailed instructions. Give each new patient written instructions that describe recommended dietary modification; herbal and nutritional support; exercise and stretching; etc. Then, periodically update, modify and revise this information as needed. You might find it helpful to have your patients fill out progress reports or feedback forms to help you better understand how they perceive their healing process.

To review:

Discover from each patient:

1. What their goals are;
2. What fears they may have; and
3. What other experiences they have had with AOM and other therapies.

Ask yourself, how well do you educate your patients?

Present clearly to each new patient:

1. The basic theory of AOM and your approach to healing;
2. What conditions may be helped and your areas of expertise;
3. How acupuncture is performed and common responses to treatment;
4. How herbal medicines are to be consumed, along with any precautions; and
5. Recommendations for diet, exercise, rest, etc.

Your caring and attentiveness to communication will reflect your commitment to healing, health and wellness. Your patients will respond well and follow through with your recommendations. Thus, you will begin mastery of the "heart of healing."

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