

Acupuncture: From a Meager Beginning to a Powerful, Professional Presence

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Upon graduating from Samra University of Oriental Medicine in 1982, I took the California state board exam and came to the stark realization that my chosen profession was in great disarray. The dismal 11 percent pass rate for that examination was an indicator of a major problem of the time. Different factions within the profession and the state board held widely divergent opinions of what acupuncture programs should emphasize. Consequently, the exam questions did not reflect what most of us had been taught. At the time, there was no statewide association representing acupuncture. The profession consisted of many small, fragmented organizations that had little or no communication with each other or with practicing acupuncturists. We had a great deal of work ahead of us to create a sense of professionalism among ourselves as acupuncturists, and in the public eye as well. Something had to be done.

The fatal exam still fresh in our consciousness, 10 of us gathered in my living room in Santa Monica and drafted bylaws for the first proposed statewide acupuncture association. Motivated by a desire to prevent others from suffering through the dreaded exam, I put to use my political knowledge from previous experience working in the California Legislature. Together we formed APAC, the Acupuncture Political Action Committee, now known as CAA, or the California Acupuncture Association. I was honored to be elected the first APAC president and determined to do justice to the hundreds of hours of exhausting work of all of the founding members. Little did I know of the daunting task that lay ahead.

At our own expense, four APAC representatives traveled around the state soliciting memberships and educating future acupuncturists about what might lie ahead if something wasn't done. We talked to legislators, the few schools and the small acupuncture organizations that existed at the time. We asked that the examining process itself be examined and that qualifications for the Acupuncture Examining Committee members (AEC) be reviewed. Carol Perrin, the AEC committee chair, was sensitive to our problem and worked diligently with us. Most important, we presented the need for unity in our profession.

We quickly increased our membership to several hundred and worked tirelessly to change the state of our profession. We collaborated with the AEC to change the examination to more closely reflect what acupuncture schools were teaching. In 1982, with assistance from the AEC, we achieved passage of legislation that strengthened our profession by recognizing acupuncture as primary health care. A few years later, additional legislation was passed that gave us the right to be reimbursed by insurance companies for our services. Other states began to follow California's lead, and today, there are very few states that don't certify or license acupuncturists. But one of the most powerful and meaningful accomplishments was our success uniting acupuncturists throughout California to promote our profession.

The New Era

We are now in a different era. Acupuncture and Oriental medicine are gaining wide recognition as primary health care as we slowly break through the invisible wall of "mainstream" medicine in California and the U.S. The California Department of Consumer Affairs considers acupuncture an accepted form of treatment for many specific medical conditions. Many hospitals and clinics across the country now offer acupuncture as an option for treating certain conditions. HMOs are soliciting acupuncturists as members. Many schools, such as Emperors College and Samra University, are affiliated with hospitals, and their acupuncture students treat patients for certain conditions in those hospitals. As a result, acupuncturists today are joining the ranks of our general medical community, working more closely with physicians of all specialties. However, in my opinion, we are doing so without the kind of professional recognition, respect and monetary compensation we deserve from both Western medicine and the general community at large. A patient visiting a medical doctor would be hard-pressed to ask for a lower fee for service. However, that same patient would be much more inclined to ask for a lowered fee in an acupuncturist's office, even if he or she could easily afford the standard fee.

Why Don't We Enjoy a Professional Presence?

I've been in practice for over 25 years, teaching at Emperors College and California Acupuncture College for much of that time. I have also taught for the NCCAOM for the past 15 years. Since I began practice in 1982, the overall training in acupuncture colleges across the country has been upgraded continually, giving us unprecedented qualifications in both Western and Eastern medicine, and establishing us as some of the most competent and qualified medical professionals in the health care community.

While I recognize the need for greater acceptance of our profession, I feel our ability to present ourselves as competent medical professionals trained in the medical community and to the general public is greatly lacking. This is primarily because we do not adequately "market" ourselves. We were not educated or trained in the art of building a business, and that is an art. Nor were we trained on how to present a "professional presence" or to develop a "successful mindset." Far too many acupuncturists do not create thriving practices because of this. Many of them do not receive the income or professional recognition they deserve.

There used to be a time in Western medicine where you got your MD degree, hung out your shingle, and people lined up at your door - no more. We now live in a world of great competition and, whether MD or acupuncturist, you must be unique or give the impression of uniqueness to achieve your desired success. If you turn on the television today, you will be barraged with million-dollar ads for the latest pharmaceuticals for everything from eye care to gynecological and geriatric products. You'll see ads and billboards for hospitals, clinics and all sorts of surgical procedures. Doctors and clinics promote themselves as if they were the best at what they do. They understand the power of positioning themselves to create a specific positive identity. The substance of these ads often has little to do with the product or service itself. They are designed to make you feel good, which then gives you confidence about those products or services. You now desire this product or service because, in your subconscious mind, you have drawn an association that this is the best possible solution because it makes you feel good. All of our decisions come from our feelings.

Are You Getting Everything You Deserve From Your Practice?

Acupuncture is wonderful, powerful, and it works. Why aren't all acupuncturists rewarded for the many years spent in grueling study, the huge financial burden and the remarkable services they can provide? Why don't most acupuncturists who pass the rigorous certifying exams enjoy the level of income and professional recognition they deserve?

One of the ways of measuring success is monetary. It surely is not the only measure of success, but it is easy to quantify. Most of the acupuncturists I have spoken with are not earning the amount of money they had hoped to in their practices. Out of all the acupuncturists I've spoken with, only a handful earned the annual income they expected.

As acupuncturists, we know our medical skills very well. However, knowledge alone doesn't feed us, clothe us, pay our bills or provide for the lifestyle we might want. Very few of us ever learned how to take that knowledge and transform it into the kind of results we'd hoped for; in other words, to market ourselves as professionals or promote this wonderful art form. Nor have we learned the art of personal management skills or developed the ability to create a unique professional identity, which are both necessary in this highly competitive market. These are crucial aspects of success in any profession, and are essential to achieving the recognition, respect and monetary rewards acupuncturists deserve.

What Is a Professional Identity?

I've worked with large corporations such as IBM and Syncor (in Canada), small businesses, movie and television celebrities, and acupuncturists across the country as a personal coach and consultant. I conduct seminars and workshops on personal and professional development and marketing. The common thread I find among these varied groups is that those who succeed don't necessarily promote what they do; they first create a unique and professional identity, then they promote themselves with their profession or product as a backdrop. Remember, people don't buy services or products, they buy you.

Acupuncture or Oriental medicine often does what it does in spite of us. This is not to discount the power of skill, confidence or intention. However, we often forget the importance of the acupuncturist himself or herself as the driving force behind Oriental medicine. Please don't get me wrong. I believe that the profession must be promoted, and more of us need to join the efforts of organizations such as *Acupuncture Today* and others that promote our profession. However, it is important to establish a unique individual professional identity in the environment in which we live today. In addition to medical skills and genuinely caring for our patients, we as acupuncturists must become students of the communication sciences and apply those skills to our profession.

First, however, let me say that acupuncturists have a great advantage. Our medicine is one of the most powerful and complete approaches to healing and health care on the face of the planet. We also have an impressive array of adjunctive therapies at our disposal. The acupuncturist must be the primary conduit for weaving acupuncture and these various adjunctive therapies into a clear and powerful message that conveys to patients (or potential patients) that this medicine is powerful, natural and that it works. You must verbally, somatically and emotionally give them the experience of the benefits of acupuncture when you convey this message. Since we don't have millions to spend advertising acupuncture on television or billboards, how do we establish an identity that will bring the many people who would benefit from this great medicine and art form into our offices?

First, you must understand your market, beginning with the patient sitting in front of you. Who are they? What are their interests and hobbies? Do they like baseball, or do they prefer the opera? Do they

have a more liberal outlook, or do they have a more conservative viewpoint? And so on. Knowing something about your patients' interests and feelings creates a powerful connection on a subconscious level.

Second, you must develop a strong sense of rapport with your patients. By rapport, I mean "entering the patient's world" so they have a sense of familiarity with you. Don't just talk with them about their complaints; also talk with them about themselves, their concerns and their aspirations. In other words, find out who and where they are, and join them. Some people follow the common unwritten law that you must never become friends with your patient, maintaining instead the more limited "doctor/patient relationship." In my opinion, this belief is not only obsolete, it simply doesn't work. Don't you trust and feel more comfortable with someone you feel is a friend? This doesn't necessarily mean going out to dinner or socializing with your patients outside the office, but creating an atmosphere of sameness or familiarity in your office. Having an interest in and gaining rapport with patients are both aspects of the science and art of communication mentioned above.

While advertising to the general public via newsletters, brochures, the Yellow Pages, the Internet, etc., can be of some help, your most powerful advertising is accomplished through the patients who walk out of your office. When they know deep in their consciousness that you care about them, will do your best to help them, are capable of treating their conditions or will find the person who can treat them if you can't, they will convey to friends, family and even the grocery clerk that you are the person with the special quality to help them and others achieve their goal of good health. Did you ever hear a friend or stranger say, "My dentist (or auto mechanic or hairstylist) is the best"? People love to pass on what they perceive is a good thing. The people leaving your office must believe that you have the desire and the ability to help with their physical and emotional problems. Why do they believe that? First, because you have mentioned the scope of this medicine in a gentle, unobtrusive yet powerful way during the course of your interview. Second, because you have provided them with a personalized assessment to serve as a guide for good health. This is the beginning marketing and advertising, and it is good medicine. If more people come into your office, they will receive the benefits of acupuncture and learn how to create a balanced life. Once they've developed trust in you and your skills, they will send many others to you as well.

You also must take great care with anything that represents you: business cards, professional stationery, brochures, etc. Never scrimp here. When people see your card, stationery or brochure, they are seeing you and forming opinions about you and what you do. Use professionals to help you in this area. Your appearance is also of key importance. Dress professionally with a neat, clean lab coat. Studies done by many marketing experts indicate that before you ever open your mouth, people form an opinion about your competence based on your appearance. You never have a second chance to make a first impression. Although this may sound superficial, the first impression you make will affect your patients' level of confidence in you in all areas.

There is much more to developing your own unique professional identity such as attending marketing and professional development seminars, speaking with successful acupuncturists and other successful individuals, and reading everything you can on the subject. Let us not forget that within the framework of marketing, advertising and increasing our income, the bottom line is to create an atmosphere for your patient that is friendly, reassuring and healing.

If you begin with this approach, you will see positive changes in your practice. This philosophy can also be carried over into everyday life to strengthen friendships and personal relationships, and to

broaden your personal community. By developing a stronger sense of rapport with people, they are drawn to you. In their minds, you have taken an overt interest in who they are; you have "entered their world." If you do that and establish a professional and unique identity, everything else will fall into place; and you can be assured of enjoying a successful practice.

Acupuncture in this country has progressed in the past 25 years from a meager beginning to a more powerful presence. It has done so faster than any other primary health care profession in the U.S. We still have a long way to go. However, if we continue to unite and exhibit our professionalism and determination, we will be recognized for the powerful healing force that we are.