

Besides Good Karma, What's in It for Me?

Cynthia Neipris, LAc

Author's Note: Beyond the personal satisfaction of helping to make the world a better place, volunteering can increase your practice success and enrich your work and life in unexpected ways. In their own words, volunteer acupuncturists share their experience and their hope.

It Starts With the Stories

"I got as much as I gave," commented Beth Markham, a volunteer with Acupuncturists Without Borders (AWB). "Prior to becoming an acupuncturist, I worked in the corporate world. I wanted to have something to offer; something that really helped people seriously in need. I think it made a really big difference," she said of her work in New Orleans. "It was really rewarding to be able to help them."

Acupuncturists are doing all kinds of volunteer work. Laura Beneshan practices with her partner in northern Arizona. They volunteer with a local Shanti Wellness project. It's a nonprofit that runs a sliding-scale clinic for low-income women, primarily in alternative care.

Jeya Anderson shares, "I had the most phenomenal experience with 50 multicultural teens at a camp called Culture Jam. We were called in to do Western medicine first aid. What we did that was exciting, though, was acupuncture and acupressure. The kids had never been exposed; they loved it. I knew the goal for the week was accomplished on the last day when a girl came up and asked for us to show her the point for cramps again so she could show it to her friend at home. Another teen asked me to show her again the point for nausea for when she takes her headache medicine. That was a highlight; to see so clearly that with acupuncture and acupressure they are helping themselves."

"We worked at the Mahabohdi Meditation Centre/Charity Hospital in Leh, the provincial capital of Ladakh, India, treating local villagers and nomads," said Laurie Martin. "Most of the people we saw had severe arthritis (cold *bi* syndrome), due to harsh winters. Some also had skin conditions, parasites and intestinal distress. Tourists were treated for fatigue and altitude sickness. We set up two rooms with five beds each that were staffed with four acupuncturists, one to two local doctors and various assistants/interpreters. Word spread quickly, and within a few days, at least 100 people a day were coming for treatment."

Marcella Robinson worked on 9/11, first on a triage team and separating those in shock and directing them to help. That evening, she worked at the Red Cross shelter. "People were covered with the crust of the building debris." She worked for three days in the Red Cross shelter doing acupuncture and massage on stranded air travelers and residents displaced from Battery Park City. "Then we worked at the Javits Center on FEMA workers. Some men from the military took Wendy Henry and myself down to Ground Zero and got us badges. He said there were plenty of people down here we could help. We stayed there for three days. Then we started going to firehouses, doing NADA (National Acupuncture Detox Association) protocol and massage."

Rabab Al-Amin describes her experience with Lebanese Americans coming into Baltimore Washington International airport due to the war. "I volunteered as a translator, then also did acupuncture. I found the mental health table and told them I could help with trauma. There was a man with a fever and cold. They had been on the road for five days; many with backaches and most in shock. About 400 people came that night. The best thing to come out of this is an opportunity to spread peace and love. That's the best thing I got out of it."

Making a Difference

"In New Orleans - part of it is the level of appreciation from clients. That's what feeds me," Erika, an acupuncturist team leader for AWB in New Orleans states. "A woman at St. Jude's Community Center who was homeless said she was able to go to a 'safe place' inside of herself for the first time, maybe since childhood. The peace this simple treatment gave her was immeasurable and the sparkle in her eyes at the end, priceless."

"I get more out of volunteer work than from paying patients," admits Anderson. "I like working with community. After five patients in the office, I feel spent; I'm done. After working for 12 hours doing volunteer work in acupuncture, I feel charged up."

"One thing that touched me was just how much brighter these women's faces look," said Beneshan. "This is a regular experience. The first time I see them, they're desperate. They are in horrible situations, living in shelters and the like. We listen to their experience and provide them with someone who genuinely wants to help them. Over time, their faces become more open, their demeanor becomes more confident and they are excited because they got a job or a place to live. My real reward is seeing how much their lives improve not just because of what I provide, but for all of the practitioners."

Ron "Doc" Rosen, OMD, LAc, agreed that making a difference is one of the rewards of the work. "The MD who was on duty at Common Ground Clinic pointed to this woman who was looking like she was in torture. She said we couldn't do anything for her. She spent 8-10 hours in the water. She was in pain and had nerve entrapment. At the end of the treatment, she looked at me and started crying. Totally broke down, grabbed my hand and kissed it. I feel so blessed to be able to do this medicine - the tool we've been given - and having the opportunity to do this."

"I met many wonderful people, some perhaps down on their luck or just poor, honest low-wage laborers who took my hands in theirs and expressed sincere gratitude. That was the best thing," said Michael Sax, a practitioner from the Los Angeles area who supervised Yo San University's externship at Venice Family Clinic, one of the largest low-cost family clinics in the United States.

Expanding Our Horizons

"I learned a lot [from volunteering]," explains Martin. "Learning about and being immersed in local culture, having the ability to communicate through service when we were unable to understand each other's verbal language. Seeing happiness in what most Westerners would think of as poor circumstances." Many acupuncturists find volunteer work changes their perspective on their own lives and life in general.

"I have a connection," Al-Amin says. "Most of the people there didn't have a personal connection. They just wanted to be of service. It changed your outlook on the war. I thought it would be an opportunity to do more of this work to spread peace and love."

Rosen concurred. "The colleagues you meet in these situations are the most special friends you will meet. You meet the nicest people."

Some, like Anderson, feel a sense of duty to their fellow human beings. "If we go to acupuncture school, we are already in a privileged class, and so being of service is essential. If you're going to use the word 'healer,' it has to be across the lines. To only offer it to those who can pay - we need to be looking after each other. Our society doesn't provide this for us."

Community Healing

"I spent some good years in Beirut so I felt personally affected when it was being bombed again," Al-Amin explained. "I thought about what would help me if I was fleeing the country. There was a woman with a barefoot 2-year-old son. She said to me, 'This is all I have, what I am wearing.' She snatched the boy when the house was being bombed and ran. He had no shoes the whole time. It was an amazing reminder of how connected we are and how short life is."

When we are aiding those who have been traumatized, we do well to remember we have all experienced trauma in one way or another, at one time or another. We have all felt isolated in dealing with our trauma. When we participate in healing, even when our role is caregiver/practitioner, we get the benefits of that healing.

How It Helps Your Practice

Some fear this work will interfere with their ability to survive or thrive in private practice. However, acupuncturists who volunteer find it actually contributes to their practice success.

"It gave me a chance to practice my spiel, for one thing," Markham notes. "It helps you know that you're keeping both clinical skills and people skills up. It reminded me how I was doing with my skills and how effective Chinese medicine is. So it was a confidence booster."

"I especially encourage new practitioners," says Beneshan. "Volunteer work keeps you busy. You're constantly getting experience. It removes the fear that the reason you don't have enough clients is because you're not a good practitioner. People just don't know you're good yet. Volunteer work allows a large number of people, including practitioners, to see the quality of your work. People remember you when you help them when they're down."

"It helped to build my skills," Martin explains. "Treating people in extreme circumstances with dire illnesses, in rapid succession with limited surroundings definitely improves skill level and confidence."

The networking opportunities with other acupuncturists and health professionals also are an unexpected benefit. Markham asserts, "I volunteered with five-element practitioners, and that wasn't my background, so I learned from them. The work we did together opened doors to talk to people about acupuncture. It also reinforced what's the same and universal about all of the different ways to practice Chinese medicine."

"It [volunteering] pays for itself in referrals," comments Anderson. "It has gotten my name out there through both press coverage and word of mouth. My new referral sources include everyone from friends of people who I've worked with to other staff and acupuncturists who volunteered."

Beneshan concurs. "We're relatively new to the area. We were busy immediately while still getting our

offices set up. It gave us great momentum by the time we officially opened our doors. Women are thrilled that acupuncture is available, and they tell everyone. It's free word-of-mouth advertising. When their financial situation improves, they come as paying clients. I now have an extensive list to make referrals to and they know the quality of care we provide."

Spreading the Word

A very common experience is finding new patients through volunteer work. "The more volunteering we do, the better it is for the profession overall. You can talk till you're blue in the face. No amount of talking does it [acupuncture] justice," asserts Markham. "I was very accepted by the mental health professionals," comments Al-Amin. Volunteering often leads to getting new patients. "

As president of the Tennessee Acupuncture Council, an organization that serves both the profession and the public, Julia Thie organized a "Day on the Hill," during which, legislators and their staff experienced acupuncture firsthand. "We set up a clinic at the Nashville Capitol for a full day and staffed it with acupuncturists from around the state," she explains. "Among those treated were the people who vote on bills that decide the future of acupuncture services and how they are regulated. We felt they should know what they were voting about!"

Acupuncturists working as volunteers also influence their current patient base. "I believe my patients are proud of me and the service I've done for the state association," Thie said. "Tennessee now recognizes Oriental Medicine Day in October each year. The proclamation hangs on the wall in my waiting room. I believe it builds patient confidence in the medicine they are using."

"There also were stories to share with clients in private practice that I think helped us all feel more connected to others on the opposite side of the world," said Martin. Feeling connected to community is a theme among acupuncture volunteers. Al-Amin reports, "I told my patients about it [her work with Lebanese refugees] because I had patients at 9 a.m. the next day. I arrived at 10 p.m. and got back home at 5:30 a.m. All of my patients who I saw that day contributed to the collection center. They were happy I did it. There is a ripple effect with the patients."

Something You Can Do

"It was such a positive experience," reports Markham. "It felt really good. It enabled me to show other people you don't have to sacrifice a lot to give a lot. I gave up one week of my vacation time. I'm more open now to doing other types of volunteer work."

According to Elijah Hawkins, "One of the reasons I went into this field was to be able to help people who are in desperate need of health care and can't afford it. Acupuncture can be so helpful to them, only they may not know. I live in Texas, so I witnessed the tons of evacuees coming into Texas after the hurricanes in New Orleans. I showed up at the Dome with my needles, but of course I was turned away and wasn't allowed to help."

Whether you approach individuals and organizations on your own or go through an already established service organization, there is no shortage of people in pain who could benefit from volunteer acupuncture. I encourage you to contact me to let me know about the work you are doing so we can send prospective volunteers your way.

Al-Amin reminds us that the Dalai Lama says, "Although achieving world peace by personal

transformation is difficult, it is the only way. This reminded me that this work we are doing is on the right track."

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