

TAILORING TREATMENT TO A PATIENT'S NEEDS

Perhaps one of the most important aspects in developing good treatment protocols is to assess carefully what kind of treatment we need to select to respond to a particular patient's needs. We were always told that what a patient needs is very different from what a patient apparently wants from treatment. Patients know what they want treatment to help them with, for these are the reasons behind their decision to come to see us. They are aware that something is not right and hope that the practitioner can help them put this right. They have no way of knowing what treatment is needed to do this, and must rely on the practitioner's competence to assess the situation accurately and select the right treatment. Patients and practitioners therefore see things from different angles.

Assessment of a patient's needs is really another way of describing the process involved in diagnosis. The problem with the word diagnosis is that it has a finality about it which is totally at odds with the progress of five element treatment. The word may be appropriate in the context of Western medicine, where certain diagnostic indicators, often carried out by some form of laboratory test, yield results which pinpoint one named medical condition or another, such as multiple sclerosis or arthritis, so that a fixed label is then attached to this condition, dictating the future treatments in terms of this label and this label only. One of the weaknesses of Western medicine, though,

may be the unvarying nature of such a diagnosis, which is often belied by changes occurring over time so that this diagnosis may actually no longer hold true because other pathological changes have occurred which may alter or make invalid the original diagnosis. One of my patients, for example, had been treated for many years for a hyperactive thyroid, only to find after the onset of some cardiac condition that her thyroid function, to everybody's surprise, was now normal.

In five element acupuncture, on the other hand, we do not rely on the apparent finality of a fixed diagnosis, luckily in a way, because we have no diagnostic procedures to define the patient's element so clearly for us. We are therefore constantly aware of the uncertainties of our diagnosis, observing our patients all the time carefully for evidence that the treatment of whatever element we have chosen is having the effect we hope for, and being always prepared to amend our diagnosis if it is not. As part of this ongoing diagnosis, we have to work out for each patient our own assessment of what we hope the outcome of the treatment should be. If we are doing our work properly we are therefore constantly checking what we think our treatment should achieve with what is happening to our patient. We can certainly never sit back comfortably and rely on time-honoured treatment formulae. Each patient therefore requires an individual approach. I find the level of uncertainty and the demands this places upon me as a five element practitioner exhilarating and challenging, and have always done so. I cannot reach for a compendium of acupuncture points to help me here, as a physician can search in a drugs compendium. Others may find this too daunting, and look for branches of acupuncture which have more rigidly structured diagnostic procedures.

We must always be aware that there is the possibility of more than a slight hint of arrogance in any belief we

have that we know what it is a patient needs from us. Who, indeed, are we to imagine that we understand our patient sufficiently after perhaps only a few hours with them to have what could be called the audacity to assume that we can accurately assess what their needs are? As I have stressed before, there has to be humility in all that we do, and certainly in our approach to understanding our patient. If we are to assess a patient's needs appropriately, we need time to do this, and we need constantly to test our assessment against what effect our treatment is having, each time creating a kind of reality check. Our assessment has to run parallel with what is happening in treatment. This is why I call our original diagnosis just the first step in a constantly evolving diagnostic progression. Making a diagnosis is therefore always based on putting forward a hypothesis which we must test for its validity each time the patient comes back to see us. Feedback we gain from the effect of treatment may well change our diagnosis, moving us away from one element and closer to another.

Learning how to recognise that treatment is helping our patient is a crucial area of our practice. We have to learn to train ourselves to begin to see the subtle evidence of changes to a patient's elements after treatment, which will be the start of the process by which we determine whether our treatment is proceeding as it should. This is where the sensitivity of our own senses plays such an important role, for what we are looking for is evidence of some change, however subtle. This does not necessarily involve, indeed rarely does involve, immediate changes experienced by patients themselves from the very start of treatment, but is usually a gradual overall improvement, an enhancement in general well-being, accompanied, if we are lucky, by some improvement in any physical symptoms the patient may be complaining of. These changes may not initially

always be welcome to the patient, and may indeed be uncomfortable as the elements within them have to learn to adjust themselves to what is now demanded of them. We may need to warn patients of this, on the principle, which they usually understand, that things may actually have to get worse before they get better. This principle, known from homeopathy as the Law of Cure, and which five element acupuncture has incorporated into its practice, acknowledges that there may well be reactions to treatment that re-awaken some manifestation of earlier conditions, memories of which the body has retained and which the acupuncture treatment releases and then dispels.

There may be only the slightest of changes, consisting maybe of an observation that the patient looks a little different, but sometimes with no very clear sense of what exactly has changed. The patient may appear to be standing a little straighter, or looking a little less worried. Maybe we ourselves begin to feel easier in the patient's presence, as though some weight has been lifted from them, or they have started to hold our hand more easily as we take their pulses rather than gripping it tightly.

We need not strain ourselves to look for evidence of some change, but as we become more proficient we will perceive change more clearly and more quickly. I know that I now quite often notice that the shape of a patient's face has changed in some way after an Aggressive Energy (AE) drain. This may happen, surprisingly, even if there is no AE there. I attribute this to the fact that an AE drain addresses each yin official, and the contact between the needle and the acupuncture point sends a signal to each of these officials that attention is being directed at them, like a flare illuminating the sky to alert a ship in distress that help is at hand. The mother of one of my patients told her son that he looked as if he was taller after his first treatment, and measured him to prove that this was in

fact so. I saw this as evidence that the relief the elements experienced after treatment was expressing itself in a relaxation of tension so that his body did indeed straighten up, and her son did walk taller.

We always have to be careful to keep our own expectations at a realistic level, since improvement as a result of acupuncture treatment will always be related to the level of imbalance in our patient. The more serious the condition, the longer treatment will take to have any effect. Our patients will be suffering from many different levels of imbalance, and over different lengths of time. Longstanding complaints of any kind will inevitably take longer to clear than something that happened only yesterday. Similarly, deeper levels of imbalance may well require longer to heal than the more superficial.