

Understanding Patient Perspective

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The summer after my freshman year at Brown University I had the opportunity to travel to Hangzhou, China to do an internship with Traditional Chinese Medical doctors at the Second Affiliated Hospital of the Zhejiang University School of Medicine, a sister institution to the Alpert Medical School, located in Hangzhou, China. My interest in this experience was peaked because I am very interested in orthopedics and osteosarcoma. I knew that there were different methods of treating cancer that expand beyond just chemotherapy. Having the privilege of being able to learn first-hand the impacts and techniques behind Traditional Chinese Medicine opened my eyes to different treatments of diseases, particularly cancer, that reach beyond the Western practices of medicine. This internship provided an opportunity to gain more experience and to better appreciate non-conventional medicine that may be more effective for some patients. As a future physician my ultimate goal is to, the best of my ability, treat the pain of others. Having a broader knowledge-base of ways to help alleviate the discomfort and distress of someone can only be a positive attribute in helping to fight deadly diseases.

Acupuncture has become a more widely received additive treatment for patients who may not be responding to Western medicine. However, there are not many opportunities to shadow acupuncturists and having the chance to experience, first hand, the roots of Chinese medicine in a genuine environment provided an enlightening adventure. Learning about where to place acupuncture needles and the “chi channels” in the body that correspond to a patient’s description of their discomfort was a very precise and detailed practice. Every chi channel is believed to be connected to an organ – either the kidney, the heart, the lung, the liver or the spleen. Someone who may be having knee pain could benefit from having the area from the back of their knee up along their thigh stimulated with acupuncture needles. I learned that treating the discomfort of a patient should be looked at from many different points of view as to all the possibilities of why and what could be contributing to an ailment because it is not necessarily as obvious as one may think.

This exchange trip taught me that understanding components of cultural views of medicine such as acupuncture and herbal medicine not only provides additional knowledge of ways to treat sickness, but also allows physicians, who may not be as immersed in a particular culture, to understand

ways to approach patients and how to best comprehend a patient’s view of medicine and their understanding of a doctor’s role as a healer. For example, in China a lot of medicinal treatments are tied in with the idea of the balance with yin and yang in a person’s body. I was taught that if a person’s yin is low then the yang must be raised. Yin and yang correspond to in and out, front and back, and up and down. They balance each other. For example, many of the patients I saw being treated for sicknesses or allergies in the summer were not affected until the winter, but with yin and yang, the balance can best be treated for a cold disease during a hot season, such as summer. Tying this belief and other ways of addressing sickness into the medical treatment of certain patients can help doctors be more effective in communicating with their patients if the physician understands the perspective of their patient.

America is known as the “melting pot.” Many different cultures and ethnicities make up the American population. Understanding other ways to address the healthcare of people can help physicians be more effective in connecting with patients from different backgrounds that may have different ideas of why particular medical practices, from medicine to surgery to routine check-ups, can be beneficial to their daily lives. People have diverse understandings, priorities and conceptions of physicians and their role in being a health advisor. Being open and aware of additional ways to approach western medicine and adding to medical conversations of why a treatment can be helpful to a patient is a key part of being a doctor. A successful physician can be defined as someone who can effectively treat and help people. Being effective in helping to improve someone’s health has to include a patient’s receptiveness to being helped. Patients are not always responsive to doctor’s suggestions and I think sometimes it is because they have different perspectives on certain aspects of health. This exchange trip taught me different ways to think about the human body and how to address particular health problems. Understanding how different cultures approach medicine gave me a chance to view it from a novel perspective. As a future doctor I have learned that I cannot only think of the Western medical view of treatment because not everyone is receptive to that way of thinking. As many physicians, I want to go into medicine to help others and to do this most effectively I have to understand how others see medicine helping them. ❖