

The Return of the Barefoot Doctor?

“The best is the enemy of the good.” Voltaire

I think every reader will be familiar with the concept of barefoot doctors. These were healthcare providers in China who were minimally trained in Chinese Medicine and in biomedicine. They worked in rural areas and provided an important service in the early years of the PRC. They had basic training in acupuncture and moxibustion, as well as the use of some commonly prescribed drugs. They also offered counsel in family planning, basic sanitation, and hygiene.

Now, a version of this barefoot doctor concept is making a comeback in some parts of the world. Through the efforts of Ryan Bemis and his colleagues at Crossroads Acupuncture, people in the developing world (Mexico, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Kenya) are gaining basic training in auricular acupuncture and direct moxibustion. This is a rebirth of the barefoot doctor model but with a bit of an evolutionary twist.

One would think the ideal would be to bring full TCM training programs to these countries, and that might well be a good goal down the road, but the reality is that right now there are urgent needs to be addressed, and minimally trained members of these target communities can provide enormous relief. I have witnessed this with my own eyes when I visited their program in Juarez, Mexico two years ago.

I went out to a Migrant Center where asylum-seekers were stuck in Mexico awaiting their court date in the US. A group of Catholic women who had been trained in basic auricular acupuncture gave treatments to a small group of mostly men. (One young woman with an infant was in the group; she had been deported from Colorado by ICE.) They all sat in chairs in a circle. The 4-5 barefoot doctors went around the room and gave everyone the identical treatment of 5NP. I treated a few people myself. I watched the local Mexican women as they worked, and I have to say that their skills were about three times as good as mine. I was trained in auricular acupuncture, like all TCM students, and did rotations in my intern days in public health settings, so I was familiar with the pace and concept, but the skill of these women was far beyond mine. They needle only 5NP many times each week, and I rarely have occasion to do this.

As I said above, the need in these communities is extreme. Climate change, extreme poverty, malnutrition, and gang violence have all contributed to make life difficult and dangerous. Rather than us riding in from the developed countries with the saving medicines and knowledge (the cowboys with the white hats), the idea is to go to these communities and train them in these therapies (ear acupuncture and direct moxa). In this way they learn to help themselves. We speak of using these trainings to “build community resilience.” This is a much better idea than us going in as fully trained TCM practitioners and impressing them with all of our knowledge. With local practitioners from their community, this truncated expression of TCM will always be there, not just when we happen to visit.

Some object that fully trained TCM practitioners are what these communities need. I understand the argument, but I ask you to read the Voltaire quote above. "The best" will be a long time coming in the developing world; what we have to do is help to institute "the good," i.e., a truncated version of TCM, just as the Communist Party in China long ago decided to do. These communities have no money to pay for anything like "the best" of TCM, and this situation does not seem likely to change in the near future. So, we need to find a way now to support them as best we can. The barefoot model we describe here is "good."

Once these models are established in these communities, further trainings can be held to expand on the treatment offerings. e.g., perhaps simple acupressure treatments can be taught, moxa trainings can be expanded, scalp acupuncture can be taught, and so on.

More Barefoot Program trainers are needed to expand on the existing programs. If you feel the call to service of this sort, I invite you to read about this further at this link:

<https://www.barefootacupuncturemovement.com>

Kind regards all around,
Bob Quinn