Softly, Softly

By Chris McAlister

Gotoh Kimiya, my teacher in Ryodoraku Acupuncture, used to teach us that the stimulation required to achieve optimal results depended primarily on the sensitivity of the patient. Those he had in mind in particular were elderly and chronically sick people, with few energetic resources. He used to express it in the form of a quasi-mathematical equation:

Stimulation + sensitivity = result.

The simplicity of this formula should in no way be dismissed as banality. On the contrary, it is the simplicity which sets the practitioner free. In my own practice I have had enormous benefit from this deceptively simple formulation.

I have found that it applies in a general sense and is a useful guideline for all people coming for treatment. More specifically it applies not only to elderly and chronically ill patients but also to two other types of people.

One type is what we might call ‘sensitive’ people. By this I mean people who are either born or formed by circumstance in such a way that the normal levels of defence and "thick skin" available to most of us are either stripped away or were never even present in the first place. They are to a large extent defenceless and open to stimuli from the outside world in a way which renders their life awkward and painful.

Special care is needed in approaching these people therapeutically without further injuring their already bruised and battered interior. Treatment strategies can include various kinds of trauma and negative energy release protocols, supported by treatments to boost the energies of the Metal meridians and Pericardium energies, as well as the power of Source Qi and the force of the Five spirits.

The second class of patients this formula is especially useful for is children. The reason children are so sensitive should be obvious to us all but is often overlooked. They are still close to the spirit world from whence they came and have not yet fully formed the energies of defence and protection which most adults take for granted. They are not yet fully toughened and tempered as we are and are thus still sensitive to subtle energies and impulses most of us hardly even notice.

In a general sense, this is something I think we should discuss more frequently and use in a more strategic way. Children see and feel things we do not - what a resource this could be if only we knew how to make use of it and could take the time to include it in our evaluations and decisions.

In a specific, therapeutic sense, it is something we could use to enormous advantage in our health care systems and quite definitely in our individual practices. Imagine how health care systems would start to look if this was the starting point in treatment approaches to our younger brothers and sisters. For a start, the over-reliance on inoculation would dramatically decrease, as would the overuse of antibiotics. Children do have an immune system; it is just so much more sensitive than those of weathered and seasoned adults.

In our own tradition, we have very simply to use the concept of dosage to arrive at a safe
and effective approach to treating children. As a rule of thumb we might start with the basic idea that when treating young people we halve the dosage - exactly as it is written on pill bottles. But then we might also think that the younger the patient, the more we tend to halve the stimulus required.

In practical terms this would mean that, for very young children, we would be giving both shorter treatments and using fewer needles and moxa cones and far less pressure on fewer points when giving Shiatsu, Anma or Tui Na. For extremely young patients the barest intervention will be perceived as an enormous stimulation, and here we enter the realm of micro-treatments.

I’ll give you a neat example from a few years ago:

I was teaching an informal Shiatsu class in Tokyo, at the home of a German woman. Her friends had gathered to make a Shiatsu group and we would meet once a week for three hours or so. One day the woman had to have her baby daughter with her in class because she was ill. I’d never heard the word colic before but I understood directly that it was something involving extreme discomfort and distress for both mother and child. The baby girl was in a foul mood and on seeing me immediately scowled and began to howl in miniature.

It struck me that this was going to be a very difficult class unless something fairly radical happened. The mother would not be able to concentrate and the whole group would be on edge - hardly optimal conditions for Zen Shiatsu practice. On impulse, I asked her to bring the baby over, lie her down across her own knees and turn her onto her belly to expose her back.

Very softly I traced my fingers down the Shu points on the baby’s back and as I reached the points for the Spleen and Stomach she again set up screaming and convulsing. The diagnosis seemed pretty obvious - some kind of stagnation or negative accumulation of energy in the Earth meridians. As is often the case, the treatment was suggested by the diagnosis.

Intuitively - having never been in a situation remotely resembling this one - I realised that if this level of stimulation caused that level of reaction then it would not require much to shift the energies and hopefully clear the problem. I showed the mother how to make small, soft spirals around the Earth meridian Shu points and advised her to keep doing so for a few days - either with her finger or with her palm, whichever felt best.

A week later I was back to teach the class again and once again the mother brought her baby into the room. The reaction this time could not have been more strikingly different. As soon as the little girl set eyes on me, she lit up with a smile that melted my heart and made the whole room erupt in gentle laughter. The mother was able to confirm that the baby’s bowel movements had normalised, that she was nursing and sleeping better and had stopped crying in that miserable and disheartening way.

Experiences like this one - tinged with nerve-wracking dread but resulting in harmony and rainbows - are the ones that stay with us the longest. I was treated to a lesson in the virtue of spontaneity and the power of intuitive impulse. I was also given very concrete proof that my teacher’s simple equation had a solid basis of truth.
Never again would I scorn the wisdom of treating gently... when circumstances dictate.