

The Bubbling Fire in the Bone Marrow Transplant Unit

By Albert Howard Carter, III, Ph.D.

The Rec Therapist and a Physical Therapist are helping an elderly man walk around the halls of the Bone Marrow Transplant Unit. As they go by, I say to him, “Good for you! Keep it up!” The R.T. says to me, “And if you’re looking for a massage patient, how about Frank, here? He’s just about done with his workout.”

I look at the man for a sign. He’s in a hospital gown and tethered to the IV pole on wheels.

He gives a small smile and nods.

“Sure,” I say. Licensed in massage and trained in hospital massage, I see patients in this cancer hospital one day a week. A cancer survivor myself, I know some of their emotions and needs.

The P.T. and a nurse take Frank (not his real name) into his room and get him settled. As I wait in the hall, the P.T. tells me, “He’s having a lot of trouble with breathing. Anything you can do for that?”

“I imagine so,” I say, and starting imagining. In this state, as in many, I must earn continuing education units (CEUs) to renew my massage license every two years. I have been taking these in Qigong, a modern form of an ancient Chinese healing method that works with energy. In one seminar, our leader, a cell biologist, suggested that all medicine, including surgery and drugs, use forms of energy.

When the nurse says Frank is ready, I knock, enter, and introduce myself.

Frank is about 70, with messy white hair and a rumpled hospital gown. He’s on his back, and the bed is adjusted to a semi-sitting position. He looks at me doubtfully.

His breath is rapid and shallow.

I extend my hand. “Frank...a little massage for you?”

“Yes,” he says, taking it.

“Where’s your home?” I ask.

He tells me and looks me over.

“Not too far away,” I affirm.

“No.”

I take a quick glance at the room, finding no signs of his life that I can pull into the conversation. I guess that he is lonely and perhaps sad. I recall my treatment for cancer a dozen years ago and how isolated I felt from the “normal” healthy world. I was thrilled when anyone treated me as a regular, ordinary person and not a sick person...or even a lab rat. How can I build a bridge between him and me?

“Well, how are you feeling?” I say.

“A little tired.”

“I hear that all the time on this floor. And you were just out walking.”

“Yes, I was.” He seems proud.

“How about I massage your neck and shoulders gently so that you can rest?”

“That would be OK.”

I move his overbed table out of the way, check his lines, and raise the bed. What can I do for this man? His scalenes can raise the first and second ribs therefore creating space for the upper lungs...but they are accessory muscles and shouldn't be doing the lion's share of work. So much for the mechanical nature of breathing. What else can I bring to him today? I'm thinking Lung Channel for sure.

“Your bed OK for you like this?”

“Yes.”

I make my last checks to protect him and me. I raise the bed so I won't strain my back. He has nasal prongs in his nose to deliver oxygen. A tube connects him to a port in the wall, where there's a humidifier that makes bubbling sounds.

I lay my hands on the back of his neck and the shoulder closer to me. I recall the words of one of my teachers for medical massage: “You can do a lot for patients just by putting your hands on them.” I can feel that he's skinny and frail. He breathes rapidly and shallowly, using just the upper parts of the lungs.

“Frank, how about we take a couple of breaths together?”

We do that. I breathe loudly in order to pace him. As I slow down, he slows down.

“Can you use more of your belly to pull in air?”

He does just that, and I start some gentle work on his neck and shoulders.

“This pressure OK?”

“Yes.”

“And, Frank, you must tell me if anything feels bad or hurts, you must tell me right away, because maybe I couldn't tell. Is that a deal?”

“Yes, deal.”

I continue gentle work, barely moving my hands.

With no TV blaring and no other people in the room, it's very quiet. The humidifier bubbles merrily.

I take his hand and work the Yuan point on his wrist for the Lung Channel. In Qigong, Yuan points are near the surface of the body and often at joints; working these points can help energy flow freely.

I continue with his neck and shoulders a while, listening to the bubbling behind the bed. Maybe I can use that.

“You know, that bubbling sound reminds of a fireplace.”

He raises his eyebrows.

“Yes,” he exclaims. “It sounds just like that!”

We listen for a while.

“I'm thinking of a winter evening,” I say, “when it's dark outside and few lights are on in the house.”

“Yes,” he says.

“Maybe there's a dog asleep on a rug in front of the fireplace.”

He says excitedly, “We have a Golden Lab. He likes to sleep with his head laid on his paws.”

I move to the other side of the bed and gently massage the other shoulder. His muscles are relaxing. His breathing has slowed considerably. I watch his belly rise and fall.

“This pressure OK?”

“Yes.”

I continue to sketch the scene with the fireplace. He nods in agreement. His breathing deepens and slows.

Over the door to the hall is a clock. I count his breaths against it: 14 per minute...now 12...now 10.

“You’re doing great,” I say. “And you know, when I’m gone, you can use the sound of that humidifier to remind you of that fire, that calm evening, that dog dozing on the rug.”

“Yes,” he says. He smiles.

As I leave, I am glad that I could help him during our time together but possibly in the future because now he has a way of using his mind to calm and energize himself. He can use imagery, the narrative we sketched, and his mind’s intent to influence how his body works—all basic concepts in Qigong.

I report the improved respirations to the R.T.; she says, “Oh, that’s great; tell it to his nurse.”

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