

You can encourage new patients to come to you through effective advertising, having an Internet presence, networking and so on; and you can equally build up your practice through enthusiasm, positive thinking and visualisation. But how do you create the loyalty and trust so that new patients commit to homoeopathy as a process rather than expecting a one-off magic pill and then becoming disillusioned?

The answer is in the quality of care within the consultation, before you have even started to choose a prescription. This has nothing to do with the quantity of care or the amount of time that is spent on each patient's case. The long interviews are a necessity for the homoeopath and no doubt they contribute to patient satisfaction and comfort. But it is not the lengthy consultation nor the amount of studying that is done after they've gone, that makes the patient return. So what we mean by quality of care?

There are four ingredients that I'd like to discuss: compassion, focus, safety and practitioner self-care. The first of these, compassion, describes a way of relating to the patient emotionally. When you feel compassion, you recognise the patient's pain or suffering and you may experience symptoms in your own body such as sighing, having a dry mouth or feeling a slight tightness in your chest or stomach. You might mirror the patient's body language without being aware of it. In gaining this understanding of the patient through your own emotional reaction, you are acknowledging the shared human condition. You feel only loving kindness towards them and a desire to help or ameliorate their suffering. Compassion is different to sympathy, which allows you to feel your patient's pain but makes you so emotional that you are unable to think clearly.

Mindfulness means remaining in the present, moment by moment without letting your thoughts stray into what happened previously or what might happen in the future. In terms of a homeopathic consultation, this means holding a gentle focus on the patient and what they are saying without being distracted, such as by possible remedies. When you take the case mindfully, your questions arise organically out of the patient's narrative as they tell their story. The patient feels really listened to and understood in a deep way.

When mindfulness and compassion become attitudes that are valued and practised by the homeopath, they can help create a healing space for the patient. This is great news for the patient but it is less than half the story when it comes to building trust, loyalty and a thriving practice. There is a lot more that goes on within the face-to-face time, before the remedy has been prescribed, long before there has been any remedy reaction.

Look at it from the patient's point of view. When someone is unwell they have a reduced ability to cope with their known world and have an increased need for safety. They can feel quite vulnerable in new situations and will be unconsciously assessing whether they can trust the practitioner/ specialist/ nurse/ machinery/ drugs/ remedies or whatever. With the conscious mind they will be listening to the practitioner's questions and telling their story, but subconsciously they will be assessing the practitioner's volume of speech, tone of voice, hand gestures, body language and quality of touch to decide whether this is someone they can trust.

Turn your inner unprejudiced observer on yourself and try to see what your patient sees. Do you speak in a calm, quiet and respectful manner? Do you sit with an open body language and an interested, compassionate expression? Do you explain what will happen in the consultation before you start? It can be very interesting to do an audit on your practice, first deciding the different aspects of best practice and then checking off on a daily basis whether you achieve them or not.

You should have very clear terms and conditions that you share with all patients. We sometimes call this a contract or a working agreement and it puts boundaries in place creating safety and security in the relationship. It doesn't matter so much what your terms are, so long as you explain them clearly and stick by them. For example, one homeopath might charge for phone consultations while another says that all phone-ins are covered by the face-to-face consultation fee. Without a clear working agreement, patients can experience insecurity, frustration or anger. They can change homeopaths over issues like being charged for missed appointments or the time it takes for the practitioner to return phone calls, if these were not clarified from the start.

The purpose of the working agreement is to let everyone know what is expected of them. Imagine the feelings of the patient whose homeopath let the session overrun so that she becomes late in collecting her child from school. Imagine the feelings of the homeopath who is bombarded with texts from a single patient who feels they can contact them anytime. Both of these wouldn't happen if there were clear boundaries.

My final ingredient to creating a thriving practice is self-reflection. This means knowing yourself and being willing to work on your own prejudices and limiting beliefs. The way we work as homeopaths with a long consultation and detailed case taking is particularly intense. Hahnemann tells us to be the unprejudiced observer but who among us can maintain this neutrality all-day, everyday? Sooner or later your buttons will be pressed, whether it is over-identification with a patient who is similar to yourself or disapproval of the patient who is different. It is human to be affected by your patients, but it is professional to work on your own issues afterwards.

Learn more about creating a thriving practice in my book, *The Compassionate Practitioner*, published by Jessica Kingsley (2014)