

We Are More Than Our Tools: The Value of Presence in the Physician-Patient Relationship



Vanessa Lindsay, BSc (hons), ND

The changes to the healthcare landscape over the past several years—shifts in resource management and access to treatment—have increased the complexity of patient care in my practice. I often find myself striving for advanced treatments that will address patients' needs. A recent patient experience reminded me that even the most sophisticated treatment plan with the most modern or innovative protocol always needs to be interwoven with an authentic, heart-based connection.

Many patients bring challenging health concerns. My caseload is full of patients with confusing symptoms and no definitive diagnosis. However, this patient's etiology was more elusive than most and her symptoms ever-changing and ever-confusing. I would often ruminate in an attempt to piece together the puzzle that was her case. I carefully considered her medical history, attended continuing education (CE) webinars, completed lengthy PubMed searches, delved into UpToDate, and consulted mentors and colleagues. Despite applying all that I had learned, no real improvement was noted. She declined referrals to other providers that I felt could illuminate and move the needle. She continued to book appointments with me despite no real change in her condition. I wondered, "why." A short time later, I got my answer. In a card she gave me, she shared her deep gratitude for my time and energy and thanked me for my commitment to her healing. She also expressed how much it meant to her that I believed in her health struggles and that I patiently listened to her concerns. She felt validated and honoured—this was the medicine. In that

moment, I realized that I had provided her an opportunity to tune into her own inner knowing and heal on a deeper level than could be accessed by an injection or herbal extract.

As naturopathic doctors, we are more than our tools, and it is the relationship we craft with our patients that builds the foundation for incorporating the material treatments. Continued learning is absolutely essential. But that learning must focus on more than technical skills—it must facilitate and improve our capacity to be fully present with our patients. There will always be cases that require us to step away from the latest innovation and simply hold a therapeutic space where we relate to our patients from a place of respect and genuine, heart-centred connection.

Patients may not remember what medicine or tincture we dispensed, but they will remember how it felt to be validated and heard.

AUTHOR AFFILIATION

BCND president, Vancouver, BC, Canada.

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Correspondence to: Dr Vanessa Lindsay, 1308 W 8th Ave, Vancouver, BC V6H 4A6, Canada. **E-mail:** info@vannatclinic.ca

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