

Needle Know-How

The Zen of Phlebotomy

Humans are brought into this world with a plethora of apprehensions: cliff-diving, parachuting, dental appointments, public speaking, and scores of other activities involve overcoming fears. Phlebotomy is no exception. Puncturing oranges is one thing, flesh is another.

Yet once that fear has been conquered, success is not automatic. If all the antecubitals of the population were identical, phlebotomy would be as simple as falling off a horse. But they aren't and it isn't. Only through repetition will the student become proficient; only through experience will the proficient become talented; and only through an unrelenting pursuit of perfection will the talented become a master of the craft.

Such mastery goes beyond the forgettable venipuncture. It demands the pursuit of competence to a dimension unthinkable, illogical and considered impossible by those who are satisfied with merely being talented. It demands that the master becomes the method. For the true student, becoming talented is not enough. Mere competence doesn't satisfy the apprentice for whom mastery is a religion. The pinnacle of achievement in the art of phlebotomy is not achieved unless the most distasteful aspect of the procedure is removed from the patient's experience: pain. The Greeks sought reason; Romans, truth. Masters of Phlebotomy pursue the perfect, painless puncture.

Painless phlebotomy, a lost art in many circles, is still sought by those who relish the euphoria accompanying a fleeting dance with perfection. But witness on

your rounds, if you will, the battlefields that have been made of the antecubital areas upon which our kind have applied their skills, or lack thereof. Battlefields littered with bruises of all colors needlessly because of the neglect of one or more of the basic rules of blood procurement. Rules that have been ignored, rejected or just not taught in the first place.

It takes a sixth sense and the ability to dwell in another dimension to reach a mastery. To shut out all extraneous distractions. To focus on achieving perfection. To sense the only approach, the only angle, the only speed and the only depth that will land the bevel in the center of the river and render that scarlet humor, and then to bring the needle back out without the flesh sensing the invasion. It takes a stealth that avails itself only to the lifelong student of the art.

The mastery of phlebotomy carries with it an air of distinction and perfection. When one collects blood on the first try from the impossible patient by a delicate blend of instinct, skill and raw intuition it changes a person. That first moment of brilliance elevates the apprentice to a new level of performance, the next plateau. One can and should feel invincible for the moment—as long as it's only for the moment. For in becoming a master of the art of phlebotomy, it is important to leave room for humility.

No matter how long one practices or succeeds in the pursuit of the perfect venipuncture, there will be failures on the simplest veins. These veins have been put in place randomly throughout the population by a higher

authority to keep skillful artists from becoming a legend in their own mind. So, unless the taste of humble pie is appealing, one should never consider oneself to be the ultimate phlebotomist. For it is certain that, should the temptation to flaunt one's well-earned reputation be given life, one will be justly humbled by a well-misplaced vein.

The phlebotomist's Holy Grail is the vein, and every venipuncture is a walk through darkness. What lies between the point of the needle and the vein is only tissue. But pierce the right tissue to the right depth, at the right speed and at the precise angle and the Grail is yours. It may not give you everlasting life but do it painlessly and you will be respected by your peers and requested by patients. You will come to know the feeling of complete mastery of the art of phlebotomy that can only be achieved by becoming one with the needle.

In conclusion, only the conscientious humanitarian who refuses to settle for simply being talented will become the artist; only collectors who are committed to eliminating the trauma of their purpose will dance with perfection; and only the collector who fixes the mind's eye to the bevel and becomes one with the needle elements will become the frequent beneficiary of the five most satisfying words in the art of blood collection: "I didn't even feel that."

Sign up for your free subscription to *Phlebotomy Today-STAT!*, the only e-newsletter dedicated exclusively to blood sample collection.

Visit: www.phlebotomy.com/PT-STAT

