

## **Allergies, the Environment, and the Masking Phenomenon**

By Heidi Hawkins, MAc, LAc

Theron Randolph, MD, was an allergist in Chicago. Beginning in the 1940s, he explored relationships between the environment and allergies. He revolutionized allergy medicine by creating environmental medicine, and by discovering and thoroughly documenting the "masking" phenomenon.

Allergies demonstrate clearly that we are not - and cannot be - separate from our environment. What we do to the environment, we do to ourselves and each other; not in some vague, general way, but in a specific, direct way still not recognized by many people, practitioners included. As acupuncturists and TCM (traditional Chinese medicine) practitioners, we can learn from Dr. Randolph's willingness to consider the impact of the modern world on people's health.

In his initial intake, Dr. Randolph interviewed his clients quite thoroughly. He asked many questions and kept his face expressionless, regardless of their answers, while typing their responses on a manual typewriter. His thoroughness in questioning resembles the questions we learn to ask as acupuncturists. In addition, he asked specifically about foods people ate daily or even repeatedly throughout the day, as well as possible toxic exposures in the home and at work. He was concerned primarily with items people were exposed to frequently or habitually.

Dr. Randolph came to understand that people often eat what they are allergic to every day. Because the body adapts, allergic reactions become less obvious and more chronic. Most people can recognize a sudden, acute allergic reaction, with all the drama of hives or anaphylaxis. However, acute, obvious reactions are quite rare compared to the chronic "not feeling good" reactions people have to objects to which they are more commonly exposed. People crave what they are allergic to, and they are allergic to anything to which they are addicted.

Various chronic symptoms may be caused by allergies, including, but not limited to: headaches; sinus congestion; eczema; indigestion; fatigue; depression; body pains; hyperactivity (especially in children); difficulty thinking clearly; and anxiety. Many people with psychological diagnoses are actually suffering from allergies. People with allergies are often told their problems are due to stress, or that they need to see a psychiatrist if the doctor can't diagnose the problem. The allergy is *masked*, so the doctor can't see it.

When a person eats, drinks or smokes an allergen every day, he or she experiences chronic symptoms that may never be associated with the allergen. In fact, the person may find that when eating the suspected food, for example, he or she might feel a little better. This feeling is only temporary, however, and is followed by the person feeling worse. The allergy is *masked*: it is concealed by the body's tendency to adapt to a chronic stress.

To unmask the allergy, Dr. Randolph guessed the suspected allergens, based on the results of his interview. He then strictly isolated his client from these suspected allergens for a period of time - usually five days. During this period, the allergen had the opportunity to be detoxified from the body and the body relaxed its defenses, unmasking the allergy. Next, Dr. Randolph had the client return to his office to eat the suspected foods, inhale the suspicious chemicals, etc. The results were dramatic. With the allergy unmasked, the response was acute.

The descriptions of such cases can be astonishing in their drama and in the wide range of allergic symptoms displayed by people with allergies. I recommend reading Dr. Randolph's books, such as *An Alternative Approach to Allergies*, for more details. Although I am not suggesting acupuncturists try to duplicate his methods, there is knowledge we can apply, both as laypeople and as practitioners. We can all benefit from Dr. Randolph's understanding of how environmental toxins affect us. With this understanding comes an opportunity to make much-needed changes in our world.

As acupuncturists, we can consider Dr. Randolph's approach when interviewing our clients about diet and lifestyle. We can recommend removal of suspicious foods from our clients' diets to observe if symptoms improve (or worsen initially). We can ask about chemical exposure to try to ascertain the source of people's chronic illnesses. We can integrate more modern knowledge of the impact of the environment on health in both our questioning and our advice. Anything we can say that reduces a person's consumption of toxic goods makes the world a better place for us all. We also can achieve better results in treating chronic illness in our clients when we address the possibility of food toxicity issues and environmental sources of illnesses.

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