

GOOD HANDS BY ANNET KING

COMBINING TECH AND TOUCH

Homo sapiens are sensuous, sensory creatures. As much as they pride themselves on their intellect, the fact is that humans rely on their senses to inform their brains. Even more than eyesight and hearing, which pale in comparison to those faculties in many animals, touch ultimately may be what defines the human species. Whether a formal handshake between strangers, a warm embrace shared with friends, the tactile dialogue between mother and infant or the intimacy between lovers, skin speaks a silent but powerful message.

Professional skin care, too, relies on the undeniable power of touch, as much as—if not more than—actual techniques and product ingredients. A great skin therapist often is said to have “good hands,” as opposed to someone who simply implements the procedures correctly. Sometimes this quality is called intangible, when in fact it is anything but. After all, the word “tangible” is derived from the Latin verb *tangere*, to touch.

Until very recently, it was predominantly the therapist’s touch, knowledge of the skin and customized protocols that motivated clients to come in and to return for regular treatments. A scant few decades ago, there were no hand-held lasers, photorejuvenation units, electrostimulating cellular repair techniques or computerized lymph drainage machines. It was all done skin-on-skin. In fact, skin therapists capitalized on the singular quality of touch, and kept their techniques as mysterious as possible for maximum drama, as though they were conducting a séance instead of a skin treatment.

Given this history, it comes as no surprise that today’s market is exploding with high-tech equipment which promises to deflate any remaining mystique.

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This clarification is needed; clients deserve to know what’s happening with their skin. Many of the devices now available to therapists do indeed enhance the effectiveness of treatment, as well as a skin center’s profit potential. Steam, galvanic current, vacuum suction, electric brushes, high frequency, ultrasound and microcurrent are useful elements. This poses the dilemma of when to rely strictly on touch and when to turn to technology.

THE POWER OF TOUCH

Perhaps the most important point for therapists to keep in mind is that the world is starved for safe, acceptable touch. In recent years, the subject has become a legal minefield. Teachers are advised not to touch their students, and human resources departments



recommend that co-workers refrain from indulging in holiday hugs. This underscores the fact that a client comes to a skin care facility to be touched, as well as to be exfoliated, extracted and hydrated.

It's also important to remember that touching the face is even more invasive than touching the upper body. Acceptable social etiquette involves patting the shoulder or the upper back, or touching the hands and forearms. Ruffling someone's hair becomes dangerous

territory, because it's an intimate gesture. When taken out of context, touching someone's head or hair may be perceived as being parental, condescending or seductive. Consequently, touching the face truly is powerful and generally would be viewed as inappropriate or even bizarre in a non-intimate setting. Therefore, to touch the client's face truly is a shared tactile dialogue of mutual respect and trust.

Therapists who may be inexperienced or who feel pressured by their clients to offer the latest device might opt to incorporate or overuse machines that perform manual techniques. This is a mistake, and will not help them master their craft or build their business. Investing hastily in such equipment is risky, as many of the new "miracle" machines are purely trend-driven, promising to shrink pores or banish cellulite with the flip of a switch. When clients realize that the machines don't deliver the promised results, they will take their business elsewhere.

TACTILE ENCOUNTERS

When a client arrives for a treatment, the first touch they experience must be human. They should be greeted in the reception area with warm, firm hands—the therapist should take one of the client's hands between her two—to communicate confidence and openness. Limp hands, especially cold ones, that don't convey confidence are the worst. Experienced recipients of professional skin care, as well as massage therapy, will sense immediately whether a connection can be made.

The next tactile encounter is considerably more intimate. Before touching the client's face to cleanse it, it's a good idea for the therapist to "introduce" touch by pressing down onto the client's arms and shoulders through the sheet. This is a non-threatening way of entering their personal space. Moving on to the face, the initial cleansing and spreading movements must be done by hand in order to establish the therapist-client bond. But here's a high-tech add-on: steam. The trusty steamer relaxes the customer and makes the skin more warm, pliant and responsive to treatment. Once the tactile bond has been created,



electric brushes may be used after the manual cleansing. These brushes are excellent for treating sluggish skin.

The area in which a therapist's skilled touch is perhaps the most irreplaceable in skin analysis. The most advanced approach to this crucial step is assessing a combination of visual and tactile clues. Again, the first approach must be manual. Technology has not yet created a substitute for the exquisite sensitivity of the human fingertips as they move over skin to feel for milia formation, oily areas, hot spots—especially when treating African American, Asian and Latin skin, which don't display redness as

easily as Caucasian skin—rough and smooth areas, dryness, dehydrated tissue and so on. The subtlest nuance speaks volumes to a tuned-in therapist.

PINPOINTING THE PROBLEM

The visual aspect of the examination, of course, is enhanced by superconcentrated lighting and magnification, which extend the range of even the sharpest human vision. The use of microscopic cameras and Wood's lamps aid in observing the most minute details of sun damage and other structural conditions of the skin. The fullest possible picture of the client's condition enables the therapist to design the treatment and prescribe product use in a way which could not have been possible a half-century ago.

Exfoliation is an area where there are two distinct schools of thought, with the central point of difference centering around

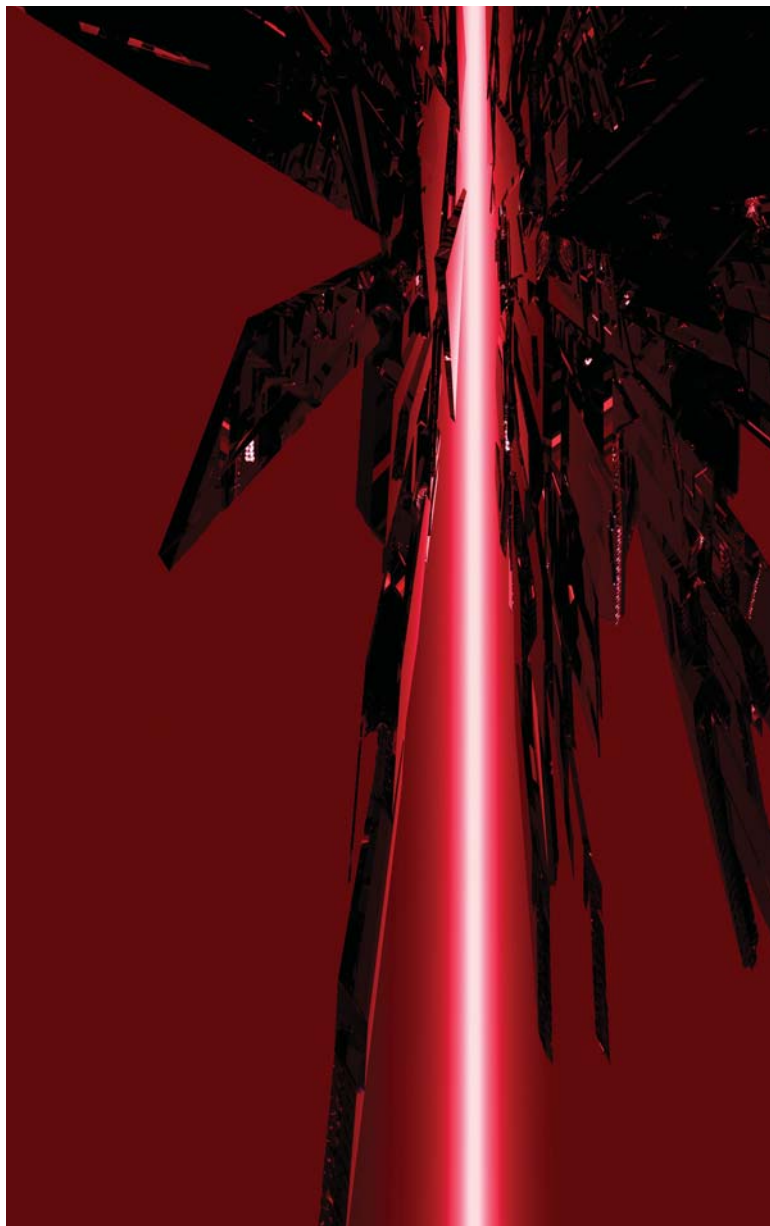
the "m" word: microdermabrasion. There is no denying that the demand for this technique shows no sign of abating. One concern which therapists must consider is the possibility that this technique may compromise the lipid barrier, damage capillaries and increase sensitivity if administered overzealously. Frankly, it's still too early in the game to determine definitively; there is no long-term research available.

Professional skin care relies upon the undeniable power of TOUCH.

By contrast, the manual application of an exfoliation product that is formulated to provide slip and glide allows the therapist to massage the skin gently to alleviate any slight tingling or stinging; a machine cannot sense a client's discomfort. Today's exfoliation technology now has become sufficiently refined to the degree that the process can be highly effective, yet comfortable for the client, especially with the development of exfoliation complexes that combine ingredients such as hydroxy acids, enzymes, soothing botanicals and super hydrators.

Extractions are the ultimate test of a therapist's skill and are best performed by educated hands with fingers wrapped in tissue—not with a metal comedone extractor or machine. The mastery of the manual extraction technique requires a unique “rock and roll” motion, where the therapist applies gentle pressure to the deepest root of the impaction, then slowly wiggles the content of the follicle up to the surface of the skin, similar to squeezing toothpaste from the bottom of the tube.

People love their cell phones, microwaves and curling irons, but no de-



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vice on earth can replicate the sensitivity required to perform extractions in this way. Too often, untrained therapists will use a metal extractor or a suction device to attack the head of the comedone directly. These tools place too much concentrated pressure on a tiny area, akin to squeezing a toothpaste tube from the top, potentially spreading bacteria-laden material and inflammation back down through the follicle and deeper into the skin, resulting in more problems.

THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

That being said, there are a number of very effective high-tech options available to employ prior to a manual extraction. Using galvanic current for desincrustation on the negative pole with an alkaline solution will open and soften impactions to prepare the skin for extraction. Also, using high frequency for a few minutes post-extraction provides the ultimate in germicidal and antibacterial effects.

Generally, machines are most useful for enhancing the penetration of ingredients. For instance, galvanic current may be used for iontophoresis, where active ingredients can be pulled deeply into the epidermis. Galvanic on the positive polarity boosts cell renewal, oxygenizes the skin, reduces redness and prolongs the effects of the treatment because active concentrated ingredients can penetrate deep into the entire epidermis, instead of the outer epidermal layers only. Indirect high frequency also could be offered for skins that are more fragile or lack tone. Microcurrent is an extremely popular method of energizing cells, toning muscles and penetrating active product.

Many remain purists to the classical manual tradition, rejecting anything more high-tech than a heated stone. This is really a bit like doing surgery by candlelight—it sounds poetic, but it's not such a great idea. The challenge for skin therapists today is to integrate the best of the new high-tech offerings into the powerful experience of skin-on-skin. This requires the therapist's understanding of not only how any device or machine works, but what superior benefits it truly delivers. Hardware never will become a substitute for human touch. However, when technology is used to augment great manual technique, clients are provided the best possible skin care. ■