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HOLISTIC MEDICINE

‘Treating the person, not the condition’

Abstract The holistic approach to diagnosis and treatment has often produced far more successful long-term outcomes for patients than the symptomatic approach that is highly favoured and widely adopted within conventional medical practices. With the increasing incidence of stress-related disorders and the physical manifestations of modern-living, the holistic and integrated approach to the management of chronic illness has a very real and important place in modern medicine today. Western herbal medicine aims to treat the whole person, not just the condition. Within the context of work, family, relationships and lifestyle, many patients have benefited enormously from their mental, psychological and emotional health being addressed along with their physical symptoms. This approach recognizes and respects the fundamental differences that make us unique individuals whilst determining the parameters of healing within a scientific and medical context. This also gives due regard to the scientific principles and findings that govern the potency and efficacy of a range of plant medicines whilst focusing on the ‘spirit of the person’ by tailoring prescriptions according to their individual constitution. This can sometimes involve other CAM therapies and modalities. A truly integrated approach to medicine that is widely offered to patients will require much effort and support from organisations, government and individuals to successfully address many of the chronic illnesses witnessed within modern societies today.

Introduction

Holistic Medicine aims to ‘treat the person and not the condition’. This approach has a very real place in modern medicine today given the many chronic, debilitating and devastating conditions so often seen in clinical practice. The purpose of this talk is to provide some insight into the principles and practices of holistic medicine within the context of diagnosis, treatment and management of many of the conditions seen within modern societies today. The usefulness of the holistic approach and the benefits of integrative medicine will be illustrated with recent case studies from clinical practice.

Treating the ‘whole person’ – the holistic diagnosis

Herbal Medicine, when incorporated into a daily routine can be used to prevent illness in the first instance by optimising health, for example, improving the immune function and so making it more

robust at fighting infection. Equally, it can be an effective treatment in a number of acute and chronic conditions. The main difference in these two medical practices lies in how illness and disease is viewed. Modern medicine focuses on the symptoms whereas traditional therapists such as medical herbalists also consider the context in which illness has occurred. This also holds true for the treatment. Often, herbs are used as a preventative measure in fighting infection or illness and it is popularly used to enhance or maintain optimum health and well-being.

The word holistic comes from the Greek work '*holos*' meaning whole. Viewing a person's illness in a holistic context is all about seeing them as a whole and not just focusing on the part of the body that is not working or is damaged. Taking into account a person's well-being gives due consideration to their psychological, emotional and spiritual aspects of health. A holistic approach to physical problems would attempt to identify the cause(s) of the condition or illness having taken the initial steps to address the symptoms in order to alleviate any discomfort or pain. By taking a simple case history, the herbal practitioner will be able to gather the most important points regarding the patient and the outside influences which may be contributing to the illness. Examples of these factors could include bereavement, stress, divorce, work pressure (eg. staff appraisal, performance-related incentives), moving house etc... Stress-related disorders are numerous and diverse. Stress can affect each person in a unique manner and whilst some will cope remarkably under the most stressful situations, many others simply 'fall apart' displaying physical and mental signs and symptoms. The real purpose of holistic healing is to examine these factors in close detail but importantly, to see if there is a real discernable difference between these outside factors and a connection to illness compared to the signs and symptoms of mere organic disease.

Herbs and holistic healing

Strictly speaking, herbal medicine as it is practised in the West today is considered an alternative form of medicine. That is, herbal remedies are used instead of conventional drugs to treat or manage illness or medical conditions. However, the term 'alternative' used in this context can be sometimes be misleading and confusing because although it is often used instead of taking conventional drugs, it does not mean that herbs cannot be used to complement conventional medical treatment. In some cases, the use of herbal medicines can form the basis of adjunct therapy. That is, it can enhance the effectiveness of conventional treatments with results being more profound than with either therapy used on its own. However, herbal medicine as a complement to conventional drug treatment is not as widespread as it could be because in reality, there are all sorts of issues with herb-drug interaction that does not permit this kind of practice. Equally, most people invariably seek herbal alternatives when their bodies do not respond readily to conventional drugs or they are opposed to taking strong drugs when they would rather try a more natural and gentle alternative that has been used traditionally in other parts of the world for many years. Much of the success in herbal medicine can be attributed to healing within a holistic context in as much as the effectiveness of the herbs themselves. The symptoms of the current problem are addressed in relation to the whole person by examining the social and cultural context in which the illness has occurred and in which the healing process takes place.

The main focus of herbal medicine in the context of holistic healing is to provide treatments that will encourage the body to heal itself. This may involve a preparation of a single herb or a more

commonly, a combination of herbs as many different areas may need to be targeted. The mechanisms for herbal action are not fully understood for all medicinal herbs although there is ample evidence on mode of action for some ingredients in some of the more popular herbs. Since two thirds of conventional drugs are derived from plant origin, there is strong drive to develop new and effective drugs from plant sources. Research into more effective treatments is increasingly based on existing herbal cures in an attempt to discover new drugs. Those remedies that represent a long tradition of use in many parts of the world may ultimately hold the clue to finding a breakthrough cure for some of the more debilitating and destructive killer diseases of the 21st century such as cancer and AIDS.

The fundamental difference between conventional medicine and traditional herbal medicine lies also in the treatment. Extensive research has shown that some medicinal plants used in their whole state have a greater therapeutic effect than the equivalent dosage of isolated active ingredients. It is widely believed that the natural combination of these key constituents in some whole plants works in synergy with each other, maximising their effectiveness and exerting a medicinal effect. This medicinal effect cannot be reproduced by one or more of the active ingredients on their own, as is so often preferred in conventional medicine. This is the basis of conventional drug treatment and although necessary in some instances where potency is the requirement, the side effects are very much the down side of this form of treatment.

This is not to say that commercial preparations of herbal supplements do not contain individual active constituents. On the contrary since preparations contain known quantities of the active ingredients (ie. standardised) to exert a therapeutic effect at the quantity specified. Many people find this a convenient and effective way to take herbal medicines. The more traditional herbalists would subscribe to the notion that standardised is getting away from whole herb preparations and in some cases, moving away from traditional practices. Both forms are effective and the varying viewpoints are very much dictated by the differing opinions of practitioners, the patients and the relationship between the two. Ultimately, the healing process is the most important factor here and a successful outcome is strongly influenced by what the patient best responds to, depending on his or her unique constitution in addition to the condition being treated.

Stress-related illness and the holistic diagnosis

Most people would not consider it 'rocket science' to work out that whatever factor is causing them stress (called the stressor) could also be making them ill. However, due to the body's remarkable capacity to cope with stress, this connection between the stressor and their symptoms is not always so glaringly obvious. Insidious and subtle manifestations are difficult to diagnose but very often, examining the wider influences on the person and identifying any contributory factors will make diagnosis and treatment that much more effective.

Symptom	Possible organic cause(s)	Likely stressor(s)
Headache	Eyesight problems, eyestrain through computer overuse & screen glare, trauma	Anxiety, worry
Recurring colds	Virulent viral infection	Reduced immunity from prolonged or sustained stress

Palpitations	Early warning signs of heart disease	Anxiety (many outside factors)
High blood pressure	Dietary causes	Stress, anxiety
Hair loss	Nutritional deficiency esp B vitamins, genetic (male pattern baldness), medication	Worry, anxiety, stress

Integrative Medicine

The focus of Integrated Medicine is essentially on health and healing rather than disease and treatment. Its mission is to involve other treatments, therapies and modalities, often CAM therapies in order to treat the many diseases of modern society today. To achieve this, there has to be much liaison between conventional doctors and practitioners of other disciplines which necessitates the sharing of vital information and the exchange of ideas and concepts in the healing process. There are also differing perspectives of various countries that give rise to differing medical practices with varying levels of integration between conventional medicine and traditional practices such as herbal medicine.

Integrative medicine views patients as whole people with minds and spirits as well as bodies and there is much emphasis on lifestyle, diet, rest, sleep and relationships. The recent reports on the ineffectiveness of conventional antidepressants in mild to moderate depression is yet another example of why a holistic approach is much needed to treat the many conditions of modern living.

Case Studies

As discussed.

Conclusions

The holistic approach to diagnosis and treatment has a very real place in modern medicine today despite some of its limitations. A truly integrated approach involving other modalities and therapies must take into account the constitutional differences of patients and will require much cooperation, effort and support from medical organizations, government, patient groups and individuals. The successful future of healthcare lies in this very approach and the contributions of CAM such as herbal medicine is immense, particularly in addressing many of the chronic illnesses witnessed within modern societies today.