



the heart of healing

Glowing health! Most agree that health and happiness come from within.

Fiona Longsdon looks at a holistic approach to well-being, and reflects on the inner wisdom of caring for mind, body and soul.

Approaching the depths of winter, those familiar seasonal germs return once more to pester our health and wellbeing. For the frail, vulnerable and elderly in our society, the cyclical dose of colds and flu brings an altogether more sinister challenge of survival. The art of healing stretches back millennia and yet, in reaching for the remedies, be it Aspirin or Echinacea, it is interesting how our approach to medicine – both conventional and alternative – continues to be debated.

With hectic lifestyles and a crashing economy, it is no wonder that, as a nation, we are feeling the pressure. Processed foods, and a disconnection from the natural world, are all contributing factors to a modern day stress epidemic. As the social and economic situation falls apart, it seems to be mirrored in our own state of apathy. It could be said that the way we're treating the world, and ourselves, is perfectly synchronised.

Throughout history, human experience has applied a variety of traditional healing methods to balance health and disease - it is thought that the Eastern origins of yoga stretch back as far as 10,000 years. In comparison, modern medicine has been with us for a relatively short period of time. The scientific foundations for current medical practice (which comprise the first two years of medical school training) were developed during the 19th century - including Louis Pasteur's study of microbiology and William Morton's dramatic discovery of anaesthetics in surgery. As Professor Man Fong Mei, a specialist in Chinese medicine, said, "To us, Western medicine really is the alternative medicine."

freedom of today

Surely we've never had it so good? With the freedom to choose from a broad spectrum of alternative therapies, we also have at our disposal a publicly funded, nation-wide health service. It is sobering to reflect on times in the Middle Ages, when those using nature and herbs were burnt at the stake as punishment for practicing witchcraft. 'Curing' people using mercury or arsenic, or incarcerating for life those with learning difficulties, and other such draconian measures from past generations, illustrate just how far we have come in the 21st century. Yet, as the NHS buckles under the strain, maybe a different approach to 'wellness' in today's society is needed more than ever?

Ayurveda uses the word 'Pragyaparada', which means 'misuse,

or failure of intelligence'. This is something that's sure to resonate with us all – we know we need to get more sleep, but end up having another late night. That extra glass of wine, a hastily snatched bar of chocolate at the till, or even the typical wrestle with your conscience about taking more exercise, are all familiar patterns of working against your best interests. Although not exclusive to Ayurvedic medicine, the concept of trusting an innate wisdom to stay healthy is not overly focused upon by Western medicine. Taking responsibility for our own health doesn't simply mean taking remedial Paracetamol and preventative Vitamin C, but more an awareness of how we treat our bodies, what we put into them, how we relax, laugh, and love. Could it be, we're waiting for someone else to do it for us?

seeking alternatives

It is often those debilitated by an underlying imbalance, or with a life-altering affliction, that seek alternatives. In Tudor times, Henry VIII – and his famed battle with gout - came to rely on the wisdom of practitioners that could offer him relief. Yet the cynicism of the royal surgeons led to Henry VIII drawing up a law to protect those herbalists that he valued so highly. In 1542, the 'Herbalists Charter' declared, "... it shall be lawful to every Person being the King's subject having Knowledge and Experience of the Nature of Herbs, Roots, and Waters, or of the Operation of the same, by Speculation or Practice."

This decree has stood the test of time – until now. In an ironic reversal of the Tudor monarch's autocratic rule, the 'Traditional Herbal Medicinal Products Directive', passed in April of this year, has ruled that only products registered under this scheme will be legally available throughout the European Union. For a wide range of alternative products, particularly those from non-European traditions (such as Ayurvedic and traditional Chinese medicine), the requirements of the scheme are either prohibitively expensive, or impossible to meet. Consequently, virtually no herbal medicines from these traditions have been registered.

The Alliance for Natural Health International, founded by Dr Robert Verkerk in 2002, is an international, non-government organisation, currently seeking to challenge this legislation. Its mission statement – to help promote natural and sustainable healthcare through the use of 'good science and good law' – is an attempt to preserve freedom of choice for individuals without

prejudice. The organisation is steadfast in its campaign to confront misunderstanding, ignorance and the might of politics. "How humans interact with plants and how we have co-evolved with plants represent the most important relationships on which our physical survival depends," says Robert. "We can't patent nature. We still have a great amount to learn from it!"

boom or bust?

Practicing as GP within the NHS, Nicole Freris has also trained in plant medicine, nutritional health and permaculture. This has given her a more whole systems approach to health and healing. She feels it's not simply a question of 'herbal or alternative medicine versus the mainstream'. However from her experience she sees that the profit incentive Western medical system has evolved essentially into an 'illness industry'. "Understanding the intent behind the system is key," she says. "GPs sign endless prescriptions for drugs, but we don't see people getting better this way. Somehow our profession seems to have lost its purpose – to help people into health, to cure dis-ease." For Nicole, the answer is seen in Permaculture. The central tenet of permaculture - the synergy of the natural world – revolves around working in harmony with the incredible life force of nature and its power to rebalance and heal.

Alternative practitioners seek to add a depth of understanding of the body's physical and emotional needs and imbalances that conventional, science-based medicine has not, historically, catered for. A holistic approach to health - that is, examining the root cause of illness and imbalance - is the critical difference here. Whilst conventional medicine has the support of the academic and scientific communities behind them, their confidence maybe misplaced. Today, 1 in 3 people are being diagnosed with cancer. As things stand, the nation's health is failing. Despite the five main chronic degenerative diseases in this country - osteoporosis, diabetes, heart disease, cancer and obesity - continuing to rise, it is important to acknowledge the

value of a national health service that now treats more than 62 million people. Since its conception in 1948, many diseases and life-threatening illnesses have been successfully eradicated, and it has made unquestionable progress in society. From antenatal screening to cancer treatment, from open-heart surgery to accident and emergencies, the NHS offers the gamut of care, with British surgeons and specialists regarded amongst the best in the world. Western medicine carries its own success rate of survival stories, and rescues many under the spectrum of medical emergencies – broken bones, burst appendix, ectopic pregnancies, or simply a septic wound, would once have been fatal. Dr Radhika Shah is a GP based in London, working in the NHS. She feels that combining Western medicine with Complimentary and Alternative methods is a positive step forward. "There is a lot to be said for both to work side by side," she says, "particularly in palliative care and pain management."

combining knowledge

Jane Tomkinson was a professional nurse within the NHS for 22 years, and specialized in Cardiac rehabilitation. "It offered me the opportunity to look at underlying causes of heart disease," she says, "and I began to acknowledge that a more holistic approach to ill health was crucial." Feeling a strong desire to look more deeply into this area, Jane re-trained as a Complimentary therapist and now combines her extensive medical experience with a more insightful approach. "It is my belief that deep emotional issues have a direct link to physical and energetic manifestations," says Jane.

Sceptics' main point of argument over alternative methods often refers to the lack of scientific proof. As the NHS continues to expand, and box ticking intensifies for General Practitioners, counter-critics argue that, by overlooking the psychological and spiritual elements to illness, the ability to activate a healing process has been lost. Furthermore, the relevance of how scientific evidence can be applied to each individual outcome

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remains an unanswered question. But, with the health service used as a valuable pawn in the world of politics, it could be said that doctors are so busy managing 'change', that they no longer have little time to reflect on what - or how - they're healing. Most private alternative and complementary practitioners charge a fee, enabling them to manage demand and supply, which allows longer appointments to be allocated - often in hourly slots or more. Considering that the average appointment for a GP lasts between 10 and 20 minutes, depending on dictated time restrictions and practice guidelines, it is no surprise that communication within this partnership can be neglected.

taking responsibility

Despite millions of people across the world maintaining their own equilibrium through natural methods and techniques, there is much misconception about alternative health. As the subject of frequent, well-publicised scorn, the contention over the placebo effect of homoeopathic medicines, in particular, seeks to discredit their validity. Pharmaceutical trials claim that those given an inert sugar pill 'believe' themselves better. In fact, advocates of alternatives are not expecting false benefits, or seeking miracles but, in reality, taking responsibility for their own existence. It seems that many of us have forgotten the point. A plant fails to thrive without nurture and loving care, much as our emotional, mental and spiritual faculties are affected on a cellular level, when we pursue life in an unhappy or destructive way.

As living organisms, we need to remember to cherish ourselves. There is no doubt that modern pharmaceuticals can have a significant impact in certain circumstances. When working with indigenous communities in the Brazilian Amazon, Nicole used modern pharmaceuticals to tackle conditions such as pneumonia, malaria and diarrhoea to save lives. But, they cannot cure the chronic degenerative diseases, including cancer, heart disease, diabetes and arthritis that afflict industrialized populations. These illnesses are all related to how we live, and pharmaceuticals, rather than kick-starting a natural process of healing, simply throw a fire blanket over the symptoms and generate a further series of imbalances in the body. It has been argued that, in conventional medicine, disease is considered in a 'Pasteurian' manner, where disease and infectious agents are vigorously attacked and removed. "Are we here to heal and understand," questions Nicole, "or blindly administer drugs to ameliorate symptoms, and in the process, generate others?" Robert Verkerk's belief echoes Nicole's. "We shouldn't block a human being's metabolic pathways by synthetic intervention; we'd do better to work with nature rather than against it" he says. As a mother of a newborn, Anna was growing increasingly worried about her daughter. The baby, her third, was manifesting

multiple symptoms of ill-health, including extreme tiredness, a persistent wet cough, and vomiting in her sleep. "Looking back, I knew she wasn't making it," Anna says, "and I was determined to find the right person that could help me." Anna took her daughter to several consultants around London, all of whom agreed that the baby girl was seriously ill, but none able to offer a diagnosis. After visiting a Kinesiologist and Herbalist, who had practiced as an orthodox doctor for many years, he started the baby on a programme of herbal medicine, with immediate results. "My regular doctor was astounded by the change, and asked me what I had done," she recalls. "When I told him I was giving her Chinese herbs, I noticed that he smirked." It's evident that for many doctors, Eastern medicine is still a system they distrust. Thankfully Anna's baby continued to improve, and has continued to grow into a healthy young girl.

However, there does seem to be a gradual acceptance within the NHS that some complementary and alternative therapies can work well alongside conventional medicine. Before the start of the NHS over 50 years ago, several hospitals dedicated to homoeopathy were operating in Britain. In the spirit of 'medicine for all', they were subsequently incorporated into the system and today, three Homoeopathic hospitals across Britain continue to offer 'integrated' complimentary medicine to NHS patients, through referral from GPs. The Royal London Hospital for Integrated Medicine (formerly the Royal London Homoeopathic hospital), Glasgow Homoeopathic Hospital, and Bristol Homoeopathic Hospital no longer dedicate themselves entirely to homoeopathy, but also offer other NHS approved complementary services, including acupuncture, aromatherapy, chiropractic treatment, homoeopathy, massage, osteopathy and clinical hypnotherapy to patients.

cycle of life

Ultimately, we have an obligation to flourish, to continue the cycle of life. The challenge of these times is to recognize that no one, not a mother or father, no doctor nor governmental decree, can do this for us. There are no miracle cures. So maybe this New Year, instead of the routine assortment of unfulfilling resolutions, we could start 2012 by pledging to tend to our health and wellbeing with depth and integrity, in whatever form that might take, and treat ourselves with curiosity, care and love.

After all, we ourselves are the living miracles.

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"He who lives in harmony with himself, lives in harmony with the universe."

Marcus Aurelius