

Returning to Sanity

A way forward for a healthier nation

After working in the healthcare profession for almost 30 years it came as a shock to me when I realised I, like the vast majority of others practising medicine and health care, was indeed not in the “health business” but in the “disease, pathology, sickness business”. Looking closer at the reality it seemed obvious that the western nations were increasingly heading for a health crisis of unimaginable scale, whilst pouring ever increasing proportion of their nation’s income into this insatiable giant called “Healthcare”.

It was as if commercial companies were choosing to devote all their resources and energies to avoiding bankruptcy, learning how to recover from failed markets, avoiding losing market share, trying to find ways of not failing, when in reality all the courses, books and consultants and experts are usually devoted to demonstrating how to be a success in business, how to increase their market share, how to make more profits! Yet here we are in the modern rich economies ignoring the challenge of health and devoting all our resources and efforts to failing health, our individual and national “health bankruptcies”, surely the ultimate folly in a sick society, the height of in-sanity?¹

Why has this come about and how can it be changed? Like all complex socio-economic problems there will be a complex solution which may not be amenable to complete analysis and detailed design, but will unfold as we individually and collectively seek a better way towards the sane goal of better health for all.

A simple view of health would be that its foundations are based on structure, nutrition, breathing, mind & spirit.

The first looks at man as a piece of exquisitely designed machinery, perfect for the job, tested in trials over millenia and proved fit to survive. If we look at this wonderful piece of engineering it must be accepted that, like any other machine designed to the highest tolerances, it will only function perfectly as it was designed to, if it is in near perfect adjustment mechanically and structurally. Otherwise we are suggesting the human body

somehow defies the laws of mechanics and can function well despite any mechanical and structural faults. This would make it the exception to every other machine in the universe, a foolish idea.

Despite this observation there is little or no significant training in body mechanics and the means to finely adjust them in all the medical training of our doctors. It has been traditionally a field of skill left to bone-setters and in more recent history to osteopaths and chiropractors who have built their healing skills around this factor. The general public have voted with their feet and have increasingly sought out those who could help them in this area of health care despite efforts to denounce such practitioners as charlatans or criminals. As far as orthodox medical thinking is concerned if there are no dislocations or fractures we will work well! 2

The second foundation stone of health is based on a well established premise that “we are what we eat” or more graphically expressed you can’t make eyeballs out of chocolate bars! Yet here again only a minimum time is given to the training of doctors in the science of nutrition and its impact on our health, most doctors will, if honest, admit their ignorance of this field of knowledge. Some medical authorities have claimed that perhaps 50 to 90% of hospital patients are there because of diet related problems.³ A Government report based on research done by MAFF in 1994 indicated over half the adult population had deficiencies in their diets, a quarter of women had serious deficiencies, almost 90% of teenage girls were low in three essential minerals and most four year olds showed deficiencies, a third with inadequate levels of five essential nutrients.⁴ Despite the serious health implications arising from these nutrition deficits, little publicity has been given to the problem and no effort to deal with these matters has been made by either Government or Health Authorities. Quite the contrary, there has been a growing pressure against the use of food supplements, legislation has been enacted by the EU to restrict the availability of certain supplements despite the proven widespread deficiencies and potential benefits.⁴

Once again it has been left to the non-medically trained nutritionists, others in the alternative healthcare field and the general public to make amends for this gap in our knowledge and help people improve their diets. Whilst on the subject of our diets and our health there has been much said about the content of modern man’s diet which may lead to disease. This is based on the premise that our genetic make-up is based on a hunter/gatherer life of our ancestors, yet today our diet is made up of vast quantities of dairy produce, grains and intensely reared meats, all potentially posing problems for most

of us.⁵ Medicine seems to have disregarded these ideas and research findings as insignificant for the health of the nation.

A third factor of health that has been shamefully ignored by medicine and I sadly admit by most of us working with alternative or complementary therapies, is the very essence of life, the absolute marker of start and end of our lives in a word, “breathing.” The poetic and religious metaphors constantly refer to “the breath of life”, we are all aware of this almost invisible process of sharing the life giving power of the air about us, it is the first thing we do when we enter life from the mother’s womb, the last thing we do as we depart and we take five hundred million breaths in between these two great events. Despite this breathing, unless pathologically bad is almost completely ignored by medicine. When did a GP check your breathing habits at a consultation unless you were there with asthma, bronchitis or other respiratory disease? This is despite the fact that over one hundred modern diseases are associated with or develop from dysfunctional breathing. I only “discovered” this fact when I learnt about the work of a great Russian doctor, Professor Konstantin Buteyko.⁵ Yet again the simple fact is that there is a normal health preserving way to breathe, neither too much nor too little, just the right balance for optimal physiological functioning. In particular the almost epidemic numbers of people in the West who are chronically hyperventilating has given rise to rising incidence of asthma, hypertension, sleep problems, panic attacks, and many more complaints that are enthusiastically antidoted by the genius of pharmaceuticals and prescribed with abandon by our doctors whilst leaving the patient’s underlying dis-ease untouched.

As regards our mental and spiritual health, medicine has little or no interest in spiritual matters, a subject usually regarded to be outside medicine and health care, and usually just offers “mind altering drugs” to help people cope with their emotional problems. If, as many pioneers in medical thinking are finding, our mental attitude to life, our ways of coping with stress and challenges, our aspirations and interests all impact on our health, this field of health care should be of paramount importance.⁶ Yet again the public generally only finds the support and help needed from outside the medical system. Pioneers of modern thinking like Rudolf Steiner put spiritual “health” at the centre of our general health, he has led the world in developing a truly holistic model of man in health and disease that links all the above elements discussed. Unfortunately in our materialistic , mechanistic world at present there is little favour in such a intangible factor

as human spirit, yet all of us know intuitively that it is the very spark that fires us in our lives and when it's fire dies so does our zest for life diminish.

So, it would appear we have, in the modern industrialised world, a medical system that caters reasonably well for some diseases and severe physical injury but has little or nothing to offer for those aspiring to better health. The consequences of these shortcomings in health care and understanding are now being felt in the West. Health care systems are under ever increasing strain despite a growing proportion of the national wealth being input, and levels of health amongst the general population are in steady decline except amongst those who have taken the initiative themselves to make changes for better health.

The way forward surely is to return to the central questions of what are the origins of health, what in fact is health, and how can we as a society redirect our efforts towards better health? There will be no panacea, no quick fix solution, and no medical approach which can take over what is essentially our own individual quest for better health. What medicine could do, would be to raise the profile of the factors behind health enhancement, to take a far more positive attitude towards health and perhaps find ways of helping individuals help themselves. Like the current failure of fighting "terrorism" with guns alone whilst ignoring the underlying social, political and human suffering which provides fertile ground for terrorism, so medicine must stop directing all its efforts to trying to eradicate disease whilst ignoring the underlying factors predisposing us to sickness and invest more resources in real positive health care. Tomorrow's medicine will focus on the improvement of all those factors which support our health, our environment, our work, our community, our families, our diet, our aspirations, interests and challenges of life and will also fully engage the individual in this partnership and challenge.

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References to follow