Health Counseling and the Three Levels of Healing

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“The physician who teaches people to sustain their health is the superior physician. The physician who waits to treat people after their health is damaged is considered to be inferior. This is like waiting until one’s family is starving to begin to plant seeds in the garden.”

*-Yellow Emperor’s Classic on Internal Medicine, 500 BCE*

These are words of advice on the value of preventative medicine from one of the most respected books on Chinese medicine, and probably more true and more appropriate now in 21st century United States than they were even back in those times. In those days, many got sick and injured due to starvation, malnutrition, plagues, accidents, and wars, conditions which are hard or impossible to prevent.

American doctors must become teachers because of the increasing demand for it. Holistic doctors, especially those of us who practice Chinese medicine, are eminently qualified to become health counselors. We are trained from the beginning to accept the fact that everything is connected, and to search out those connections. An effective health counselor must be able to connect everything.

Health counseling for Americans must move far beyond mere nutritional advice, even though that is currently the only kind of teaching that the majority of Americans expect from holistic practitioners. It is commercial advertising that has programmed most Americans to obsess over “good” foods and “ bad” foods and to search for oral solutions to nearly every health problem. Advertising has been developed into a high art form in the United States. In fact, the U.S. is the undisputed Mecca of advertising and the snake oil sales pitch.

The three levels of healing

1. Relieving the symptoms

This first level of healing is the easiest and quickest to perform, and is often confused with the term *cure*. It relies on physical techniques to ease suffering and relieve pain. This is the level at which Western medicine excels, although in the absence of an emergency situation, results will often come with unwanted side effects. Chinese medicine and other holistic disciplines can also relieve symptoms, although results will usually take a little longer - while being free of negative complications.

Chinese medicine will generally rely on acupuncture, herbology, moxabustion, and massage for the relief of pain and other symptoms.

Medical practices that focus on symptom relief generally do a good business in America because, while relief is amazing and wonderful for many Americans concerned solely with the quick-fix , the problems eventually repeat and so do the patient visits.

2. Breaking the syndrome

The second level of healing is currently Chinese medicine’s claim to fame in the U.S. It involves relieving symptoms and getting rid of a problem for a long period of time, without harmful side effects.

The body/mind will fall into unhealthy patterns that we call syndromes. If a patient is willing to undergo long term holistic treatment, those patterns can be disrupted and broken, and the body/mind can be set onto new healthier patterns. Usually this involves an accurate Chinese diagnosis and an appropriate treatment plan that involves the use of physical techniques such as acupuncture and herbology.

But this is only the second stage of healing in America, because it offers no guarantee that the problem won’t come back, either in the same form or in a different one. For example, the use of physical techniques might be successful at extinguishing the internal heat that is causing sinus allergies, and that success might last for a long time. Eventually however, that heat will creep back, either as sinus allergies again or in another form like conjunctivitis or insomnia.

3. Achieving the cure

The word *cure* is overused in America. It is commonly misapplied to the first two levels of healing. When it comes to curing a problem, we should not be satisfied with an inferior definition, since we do have the knowledge and tools to aim for something higher. Let those of us who practice Chinese medicine take the high road from now on.

To cure a medical problem means to relieve the symptoms, break the syndrome, *and* get rid of a problem so that it is prevented from ever returning in any form. This is to say that a true cure includes palliative and preventative medicine.

In the U.S. of the 21st century, there’s plenty of food, clean water, public sanitation, clothing, antibiotics, and emergency clinics to maintain a high degree of health. A genetically heterogeneous population of immigrants rules out genetic factors as being the major cause of health problems.

The underlying causes of ill health – the roots of most health crises – are the everyday choices Americans make. The shen makes these choices. For Americans, health problems are largely the result of inappropriate choices made by the uninformed shen.

In America, the uninformed shen chooses to worry, an action that is always pathological and never appropriate. The uninformed shen chooses to hurry, an action that is causes disease and is rarely appropriate. The uninformed shen chooses to overeat, another action that is dangerous and never appropriate in modern America.

In other words, in this country, reaching a cure – the deepest level of healing - requires the re-education of the shen. Only the choices that the shen makes can *prevent* the disorder from returning. The superior physician must become a shen doctor.

The practicality of health counseling in America

In the United States, teaching people to improve or sustain their health is superior medicine, but is not superior business. Assembly line medicine – commonly practiced in the U.S. and China - does not teach anyone anything except to rely on the medical practitioner for emergency relief. But it makes money. Teaching takes time, and the fewer patients who are seen in a day, the lower the monetary rewards. And so only a special kind of practitioner will be attracted to this new-and-old concept of medical practice which features health counseling.

Health counseling, while an integral part of ancient Chinese medical practice, is being reintroduced here to the Chinese medical mainstream after more than a century of absence. Therefore, one must ask if this is realistic? Can health counseling by practitioners of Chinese medicine in the U.S. really work? And what will it take to make it work?

The following are some practical considerations.

* Health counseling cannot substitute for professional psychological counseling. Only trained psychological therapists can help Americans whose deep childhood or adulthood hurts impel them into serious self-destructive behavior patterns such as alcoholism, drug addiction, obesity, anorexia, attempted suicide, and crime. When health counseling and standard medical techniques run up against a stone wall, the only alternative is the recommendation of serious long-term cognitive-behavioral therapy - CBT.
* Psychosis is a collection of crippling mental disorders that will generally require the intervention of modern psychiatric drugs in order to dispel heart phlegm and restore a semblance of normal behavior. Health counseling can be useful once the shen is clear enough to receive new information and respond accordingly.
* Practitioners must work to eliminate worry, hurry, and overeating in their own lives. Teaching by example is still the most powerful form of instruction. In addition, the experiences gained from treating oneself in this regard will ultimately benefit patients.
* Practitioners must be able to counsel patients adequately and at the same time earn a good living. A minimum of one hour per patient once per week should be sufficient to help most Americans understand why they behave inappropriately while learning new healthy habits to replace the old ones. This teaching can and should take place before, during, after, and in between acupuncture or acupressure sessions.
* Health counseling magnifies the beneficial effects of herbology, acupuncture, and the other conventional techniques because it enlists the patient’s aid in pushing in the same direction, i.e. fulfilling the treatment plan.
* Teaching self-trust is at the core of health counseling. Suggestions can be helpful, but simply instructing people on what to eat and not eat is the opposite of teaching self-trust. The body already knows what it needs and doesn’t need, and knows it far better than any outside expert. Self-trust is the basis of self-esteem, and together they have the power to defeat American pathology, because worrying, hurrying, and overeating are culturally induced and are actually against our natural inclinations.

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