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Holistic Approaches To Health And Disease

"The 'holistic' approach to health and disease considers a system in its entirety rather than focusing on isolated parts of it".

Donald Watson A Dictionary of Mind and Body
1995 London: Andre Deutch Ltd.

"The word health comes from a root meaning 'whole': Old English (hael)

"Alternative medicine is one of several ways of referring to a variety of therapies and types of health care which are not normally available from the so-called general practitioner trained in orthodox medicine".

(op.cit. p. 185)

1. Introduction

Sometimes the alternative medicine approach is also called 'complementary therapy' which can be confusing as some therapies in this genre stand in philosophical opposition to the orthodox medical method they are meant to compliment. For example, homeopathy treats 'like with like' whereas the allopathic method of orthodox medicine aims to counteract the symptoms manifested in a disease. Thus homeopathic allergy treatment will prescribe minute amounts of the allergen; the allopathic method will prescribe medication to counteract the allergic reaction.

The basic principles behind holistic medicine are:

- Each individual is unique - body, mind and spirit
- All states of health have a psychosomatic element
- Health maintenance is beyond the scope of pathology alone - one cannot ignore psychosocial aspects of life-style and personal fulfilment
- Illness represents a creative opportunity for the client to know more about him/herself
- Client and practitioner share the responsibility for the healing process.
- The practitioner must also have a high degree of self-knowledge



Holistic Approaches ...



2. Types of Alternative Therapy

The various alternative therapies can be categorised according to the method they use:

- **Natural Remedies** - use naturally occurring substances e.g. food and diet; colonics
- **Manipulative Therapies** - work on the musculo-skeletal structure, although benefits are claimed to also act upon the whole person
- **Awareness Therapies** - yoga and martial arts are examples
- **Sensory Therapies** - use colour, art, music and touch to treat both body and mind
- **Mental Therapies** - include hypnosis, counselling and self-help groups

3. Recent History of Alternative Therapy

The rise of alternative therapy seems to have occurred in direct proportion to the lack of faith in the ability of modern medicine and doctors to deliver the dream and promise of the NHS - a cure for every ill.

The thalidomide tragedy in the 1960's probably accelerated the demise in respect and hope placed upon doctors.

Additionally, with the increase in technological medicine has also come an increase in illnesses caused by such technological advancement, for example, the advent of antibiotics has also brought resistant strains of bacteria like MRSA that are increasingly proving a major problem in hospital settings.

Doctors have been slow to adapt to the growing loss of confidence in their care, and indeed have seen their own workloads increase to the point when they too are suffering from many stress related symptoms, e.g. alcoholism among doctors is about three times the figure for other professional groups, and mental illness including depression and suicide is twice as common amongst doctors as amongst those of equal professional standing (Watson *ibid* p.17).

4. Reasons given for consulting alternative therapists

Reasons for consultations reflect the increasing pressures on doctors' time and energy.

They include:

- Alternative practitioners offer more time
- Alternative practitioners offer more compassion
- Alternative practitioners are more likely to touch their patients
- Alternative practitioners are more likely to have charisma (maybe this is seen as a sign of authority and expertise?)

Whilst the medical profession is now modifying its stance, it remains a slow process. This despite the fact that it has been possible to obtain homeopathy on the NHS since its inception in 1948! (There are NHS Homeopathic hospitals in Glasgow and London). Nurses in a few hospitals are now using aromatherapy to help patients relax, sleep better, and hopefully recover faster. Osteopathy became a recognised therapy in 1994 when a Bill was passed in the Commons to set up the General Osteopathic Council, responsible for setting practitioner codes of conduct and training standards.



Holistic Approaches ...



5. Western Medicine and Alternative Therapies compared

Nevertheless, there remains an enormous difference between orthodox western medicine and the main systems of alternative medicine.

'Orthodox' medicine regards the human body as a mechanism; if it breaks down somewhere, the doctor intervenes to eradicate all symptoms of disease and to get everything working properly again. Most alternative systems see the human organism as multi-dimensional;... disease is the result of underlying imbalance in the interconnected mind, body and spirit'. (Watson p. 19)

Further, one principle of Chinese medicine is that one treats the person, not the disease. This means that different people with the same symptoms and the same disease (in western terms) need to receive different treatment. This makes clinical trials virtually impossible and as such undermines the major assumption of allopathic medicine that symptoms of disease and their cure can be generalised among the population.

Traditionally, western medicine is dispensed by experts to passive and relatively uninformed recipients. Holistic approaches treat each human being as 'an indivisible whole of extreme complexity' (Carrel 1935) necessarily involved in the understanding, responsibility and treatment of their condition.

6. Health Promotion

Alternative therapies are essentially preventative since the aim is to assist the client to regain balance within all aspects of their being. Orthodox approaches are more 'sick-oriented' with doctors only being consulted when something has gone wrong. The 'alternative' approach encourages self-responsibility for health whereas the latter relies on the 'expert' model of medicine that encourages patients to be dependent.

Questions to ponder!

1. Orthodox medicine dispenses treatment but does not invest in health. Do you agree?
2. Can a 'holistic' approach exclude traditional medicine and still be considered 'whole'?

Websites

www.acupuncture.org.uk

www.chiropractic-uk.co.uk

www.osteopathy.org.uk

www.homeopathy-soh.org

www.int-fed-aromatherapy.co.uk

www.reflexology-uk.co.uk

