

6th College of Surgeons Lecture[†] The Philosophy of Balance: The Art of Healing

Keong Tatt Foo,¹ *MBBS(Singapore), FRCS (Ed), FAMS (Urology)*

Abstract

With the rise of high tech medicine, and emphasis on the scientific aspects of medicine, there is danger that we may lose the balanced approach to healing, and lose the benefit of the traditional medical wisdom and emotional support, to improve the care of our patients. Allopathic or the mainstream medicine (Western medicine) is not the only way. With over-emphasis on the anatomy and pathology, the biochemistry and the molecular biology, we tend to treat the disease, and somehow neglect the patient. That is one of the reasons why many patients still turn to alternative medicine to relieve their ailments. We need to remember that the patient is a person, consisting of not just the body, but also the mind and the spirit. We therefore need to treat not just the body but also the mind and to heal the spirit. That would be the balanced approach in the management of patients. To treat our patients optimally, we need to understand the natural history of diseases, and not make our treatment worse than the disease itself, carefully balancing the risks and benefits in our treatment for that individual patient. The mind has more influence over the body in health and diseases than we used to think. We need to be optimistic and give patients hope through counseling, and help to minimise the harmful effects of stress and anxiety on the body. It is as important to improve the immunity of the body to diseases (infection as well as cancer) as to get rid of every bacteria or cancer cell. It may not be possible to get rid of all the cancer cells in the body, but it may be possible to keep them under control. The most important factor in improving the immunity is for the patient to have a relaxed mind. He would need emotional support from family and friends. Exercise, proper diet with plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables would help to improve immunity and speed up the healing process. The art of healing is the art of balancing the Science and the Art of Medicine, treating the disease and the patient as a whole, incorporating the best in allopathic (Western) medicine as well as complementary medical practices. With this, we hope to provide the best care to our patients.

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Introduction

With the rise of high tech medicine, and emphasis on the scientific aspects of medicine, there is danger that we may lose the balanced approach to healing, and lose the benefit of the traditional medical wisdom and emotional support to improve the care of our patients.

The Science of Medicine is constantly changing. Almost everyday, there is some new discovery or new treatment reported in the media. Treatment lauded as the latest and most up-to-date today may turn out to be of no use on longer term follow-up and become obsolete. In contrast, the Art of Medicine is timeless. It is as relevant today as it was 4,5000 years ago at the time of Huang Ti, or the time of Hippocrates, and will still be relevant in the future.

In our balanced approach to healing and health, we need to understand the fundamental nature of health and diseases. Health is defined as, not just absence of diseases

but of well being in both body and mind. In allopathic or the mainstream medicine, we were taught anatomy and pathology, biochemistry and molecular biology, but had largely ignored the mind. There is over-emphasis on the body, the disease, and we have forgotten the patient as a person. We tend to treat the disease, and somehow neglect the patient. Treating the disease is the science, while managing the patient is the art. That is one of the reasons why many patients still turn to alternative medicine to relieve their ailments. The key is to have a balanced view. Allopathic or the mainstream medicine (Western medicine) is not the only way.

The Patient as a Person

A person consists of not just the body, but also the mind and the spirit. If you do not believe in the spirit, which lives on and is immortal, at least you cannot deny that the

¹Emeritus Consultant, Department of Urology, Singapore General Hospital

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mind exists! Are the mind and the brain the same? We can create a robot, which can have intelligence like the brain, but I doubt whether we can create one which will have the emotions of love and compassion. That is the difference between the brain and the mind. The mind has greater influence over the body, health and diseases than we thought. We often hear of sudden death from extreme emotional stress. A recent story is about a filial son who volunteered to dig the grave for his mother. He was so overcome by emotional stress that he developed a heart attack and died. Another example was a very pleasant patient, Mr Tan, in his early sixties, who had cancer of the upper urinary passage, treated with surgical removal of the passage and the attached kidney (nephroureterectomy). A few years later, the disease recurred in the bladder and this was removed with a loop cautery knife through an endoscope, and treated with anticancer medication instilled into the bladder (intravesical chemotherapy). He was followed up regularly. The bladder recurrence was under control but subsequently the cancer was found in the lower urinary passage (prostatic urethra). By now he was in his seventies. As he was relatively asymptomatic, he was treated conservatively with biopsy and cautery of the lesion. All these years, whenever he came to the clinic, his devoted wife accompanied him. One day she was absent and we heard the sad news that she had died of a heart attack. Within 6 months, Mr Tan's cancer in the prostatic urethra became uncontrollable and in spite of major surgery, he died shortly after.

Mind-Body Medicine

There is now more scientific evidence to show that the mind does influence the body substantially in health and disease.

In an interesting experiment on rabbits in cages, fed with high cholesterol diet, 100% of those in the upper cages developed arteriosclerosis plaques or hardening and thickening of the blood vessels, while of those in the lower cages, only 40% did so.¹ The only difference was that, the rabbits in the lower cages were cuddled and played with when they were fed, while those in the upper cages were not! This showed that emotional support or lack of it is very important in health and diseases.

Spiegel, in 1989 reported in *Lancet*, a well known medical journal, his study on 2 groups of patients with advanced wide spread breast cancer. One group was given counseling and emotional support, while the other group served as control. On follow-up, he found that the group given emotional support survived twice as long as the controlled group.² There was no side effect; in fact, the quality of life of the treated group was even better! If it were a drug therapy, it would be lauded as a breakthrough, and the drug company

would sponsor him all over the world to give talks and promote the drug!

Counseling and emotional support are very important for cancer patients. They are important adjunct to our surgical procedures or medications. We need also to do more to promote the patients support groups.

Understanding the Natural History of Diseases

Most of the time the body can heal itself. It is estimated that the majority of patients who attended the doctor's clinic do not need medications or procedures. What they need is proper diagnosis, reassurance and counseling. In spite of the large amount of resources and high tech medicine, the improvement in outcome, in terms of quality and quantity of life is often marginal. Since the early 1950s, the improvement in life expectancy from around 50 years to 80 years today is mainly due to improvement in public health and infant mortality rate, than to the high tech and high cost medicine invested in the past few decades.

As physicians, we need to understand the natural history of diseases so that we do not intervene unnecessarily and do more harm. We should not make the treatment worse than the disease itself. Intervention is not without risks, the more invasive, the higher the risks. Not all cancers are aggressive. Some are relatively slow in progression and will not cause death of the patients. One good example is prostate cancer. Patients with a well-differentiated (non aggressive) cancer can live a normal lifespan with no symptoms and good quality of life. Our intervention to try to cure the disease with surgery, radiation or drug may cause more harm.

Therefore we should balance the risks and benefits of treatment for our patients with the natural history of the disease in mind before deciding on the management.

Treat the Cause, not the Symptoms

This is the basic principle in management of disease in mainstream medicine. However, very often we look for the cause only at the body level, and forget about the mind. We are often satisfied with finding the bladder cancer as the cause of blood in the urine and forget to enquire further. The cause of the cancer may be related to the patients' life style, smoking for example and also to stress, which may lower his immunity to cancer. A balanced approach to the management of this patient would therefore be not just resection of the bladder cancer but counseling with regard to smoking and management of stress, relaxation exercises and diet. This will improve his immunity to cancer.

Improving the Immunity of Patients

It may be more important to improve the immunity of our patients to cancer, than to attempt to get rid of every cancer cell in the body with super-radical surgery, radiation therapy or toxic chemicals which may make our patients more ill. We need to have a balanced approach. Often it is not possible to get rid of every single cancer cell in the body, but it is possible to improve our patient's immunity to control the cancer. The most important thing is for patient to have a relaxed mind, to have confidence and trust in his healer. To achieve this positive doctor-patient relationship, the doctor needs to have the correct attitude, and that his guiding principle as a doctor is to improve the care of his patients. His core purpose is not just to treat, but to care, not just to care but to strive to improve on the care. That whatever he does is done with the best interests of the patient in mind. To help the patient to relax and have confidence and trust in him, the doctor needs to empathise with the patient and understand his anxiety and fear. He should emphasise on the positive aspects of the prognosis and be optimistic rather than pessimistic to give the patient hope. He should be a teacher and counselor rather than just dishing out pills or a technician treating the disease and not the patient! In fact, the root word for "doctor" is a teacher, and not just some one who treats the sick.³

Exercise

Exercise is also important in the management of our patients. Exercise helps to relax the mind and promotes the feeling of well-being, through production of endorphin. Exercises need not be strenuous; in fact brisk walking for half an hour each day 3 times per week has been shown to have benefits. It has been reported in a reputable journal that moderate exercise such as walking 2 miles per day can decrease mortality by 50% and cancer death by 66%.⁴ Exercise increases insulin sensitivity and decreases insulin growth factor (IGF 1) which has been shown to stimulate prostate cancer cell growth. Exercise also stimulates the production of growth hormone, which is important in anti-ageing. Exercise will keep us fit and young!

Relaxation

Relaxation exercises such as Taiji, Qikong, and Yoga not only stimulate the body but also help the mind to relax. It has been proven to be of benefit to many chronic illnesses, such as rheumatoid arthritis and hypertension as well as cancer. In a recent randomised control pilot study, it was shown that Taiji exercise, an hour 3 times per week, may have beneficial effects on breast cancer patients by lowering insulin and IGF 1 levels and promoting anti-inflammatory response through release of cytokine IL-6.⁵ Relaxation

can also be achieved through meditation. Learning how to empty your mind daily is a good way of managing stress. Meditation is especially useful when medications are no longer effective in the control of the cancer. Meditation may be better than medications under certain circumstances! Time spent in counseling should be the standard in our management of patients. Of course, it is easier and faster to write out a prescription than to spend time explaining and counseling, but it is time well spent.

Diet

We are what we eat. A proper balanced diet is important to help our patient to heal. Many of the chronic diseases can be traced to poor dietary habits. Though occult prostate cancer has the same incidence worldwide, clinical prostate cancer is 10 times less common in Asian countries than in the Western countries. One of the contributing factors is in the dietary fat which is consumed less in Asia. Asians who migrated to the United States and changed their dietary habits showed an increase in the incidence of prostate cancer by 3 to 7 folds.⁶ It is also suggested that the phyto-oestrogen present in the soya-bean products, consumed regularly in our Asian diet may offer protection against prostate cancer. Fresh fruits and green leafy vegetables are food with high anti-oxidant content which would help to reduce the incidence of cancer. It was reported recently that it is not the high fibre diet which prevents cancer, but the low fat content when high fibre diet is taken that showed the benefit. A low fat diet of less than 20% suppresses the growth of prostate tumour cells implanted in the rats.⁷ Thus counseling on proper diet and exercises should be an important part of our practice in the balance approach to healing and health. This is more so in patients who are managed with active surveillance.

Achieving Balance in the Art of Healing

Achieving balance in the art of healing is not easy. It requires many years of experience, and a good mentor to guide us. In science, we have statistics to help us. For example, whether a certain treatment in randomised control trial is statistically significant, but is it clinically significant in real life practice? When is clinical significance, significant? Apparently there is no correct answer. It depends not only on the disease's natural history (the science), but also the particular patient the doctor is managing, patient's age, other medical morbidities, his expectations and anxieties, and also his social economic status. To achieve a balanced approach, the doctor needs to know not only the pathology of the disease but also to try his best to predict the often unpredictable in medicine. He also has to understand his patient, and empathise with him. He would need experience

and the correct attitude that whatever decision made is in the best interests of the patient.

Conclusion

The art of healing, is the art of balancing the Science and the Art of Medicine, treating the disease and the patient as a whole, incorporating the best in allopathic (Western) as well as the complementary medical practices. The mind or the spirit may be more important than the body. Though often we may not be able to cure the body, there is always the opportunity to heal the mind and spirit.

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