

What Are The Differences Between Chinese Medicine and Western Medicine? - A Discussion by Maureen Dennis

The doctor can treat a disease but only nature can heal: Hippocrates

Looking at 20th century medicine, would Hippocrates recognise his advice? This quotation has much in common with Traditional Chinese medicine, but Western doctors consider they have little or nothing in common with their Chinese counterparts. Where has this divide come from? What in the last 300 years has caused it?

Chinese culture has remained isolated for a long time. It was also very autocratic with a rigid social structure. Scientific experimentation progressed in the West. In the East, we find not experimentation but a philosophical scrutiny of man's relationship to his Universe. This relationship is considered cyclical -from non-being to being back to non-being causing a transformation of energy in all forms. If a human being "followed the flow" that is, stayed in harmony with the Natural Universe, all would be well. If not, all sorts of imbalances would ensue leading to social and personal disharmony and physical illness.

Western medical thinking by discovery, dissection and analysis tried to discover the microcosmic causes for an illness, and applications which may reverse it. Chinese thinking is more modest in its claim. This is because it is aware that everything is in a state of flux. Everything can become the very opposite of what it presents to be. Heat is lost to cold, dark changes to light, wet to dry. This is true in the natural world and it happens in the human body and no more so during the worsening or improving of an illness.

Empirical observation and questioning are skilfully taught to Chinese doctors so that they can learn what symptoms a patient has. They are also looking for a pattern within these symptoms which can be analysed in patterns of excess and deficiency, heat and cold, movement and stagnation. Symptoms are clues to the root cause of the imbalance.

Western medicine is concerned with the description of disease in a very concrete and specific way and not with the description of health. It relies heavily on technological tests and laboratory measurements for diagnosis. Doctors are not looking for patterns. The right to health is assumed without the sense of responsibility to maintain it. Illness has taken on a crisis model, an injustice ill-deserved. Theories of invasion by germs, inherited genetic illness, and the random infliction of physical trauma reinforce this model.

In matters of diagnosis, the conclusions of the doctor have to be based on objective scientific fact. The diet, life-style and emotional factors, which may have contributed to the illness, are to be ignored in favour of physical symptoms, which finally must be suppressed.

The Eastern doctor is permitted to use his intuition regarding a particular patient. This involves showing concern for the spiritual as well as the physical sources of disharmony. Diagnosis may therefore be more imprecise than that required by the Western doctor but it will be more holistic. A symptom is a clue to an inner disharmony related to the functions (rather than the structure) of the major organs of the body. The emphasis is on finding out the cause of the functional disharmony between the organs and not, as in the West, on specific structural abnormalities of one particular organ or specialism.

The Western doctor has a heavy responsibility to suppress or cope with the illness by the intervention of surgery and /or pharmaceuticals. The authority lies with the doctor to not only describe the crisis by the explanation of symptoms but to block them in their path by suppression or elimination. The situation is inherently undemocratic because it is assumed that the doctor has some specialised knowledge from this great pool of scientific certainty (known as medicine) and can therefore cure the illness even at the life threatening stage.

Suppressing a symptom is not curing an illness. The Western doctor, though expert at "crisis management" is avoiding dealing with the imbalance which is central and crucial to the presentation of the "illness".

To the Chinese doctor, the natural vitality of the patient is as important as the symptoms. Over prescribing will damage the natural tendency for the patient to heal himself. It is considered better to apply the principal of "Wu-Wei" or "Do nothing extra"

Old age, disablement and death are not easy subjects for the Western patient to accept and he will do much to avoid confronting their embarrassment and inevitability. They are not easy for any mortal but an understanding of the cyclical nature of life as in Taoist philosophy makes them easier to accept. The Chinese attitude to old age is that physical activity and philosophical insight will promote a healthy and active old age. It is only in the West that chronic illness and old age expect to go hand in hand.

Chinese medicine is more concerned with the maintenance of physical and emotional balance that is "health". It is important to consult the doctor at an early stage when irregularities can be detected in the body system and reverse. Symptoms are a clue to the imbalances of Yin and Yang energy. These, to the Westerner, are no more than the chronic manifestations of sympathetic and parasympathetic arousal. "Yin and Yang" Parasympathetic and Sympathetic" call them what you will- if not reversed will cause irreversible changes and the chronic debilitating illnesses of later life - Cancer, Diabetes, Heart Disease and Mental illness.

It is therefore not possible in Chinese medicine to have a stock diagnosis for a stock set of symptoms. The doctor aims to restore balance by unblocking those energy channels known as "meridians" by the stimulus of acupuncture needles. These do no more than to open pathways to let the body capitalise on its capacity to heal itself. This may be reinforced by the heat of burning

herbs (called moxibustion), the consumption of natural herbal remedies, and the repetitious activity of Chi Qong exercises. Fundamental to the maintenance of recovery are changes of lifestyle and social adjustment at a very personal and emotional level. The medical professional can suggest change but the responsibility lies with the patient to maintain that change.

The Western is more biomechanical and often does have dramatic success when illness is at a life threatening level. However the training of scientific objectivity causes doctors to apply a stock set of prescriptions for a stock set of symptoms. This skill has become rubber -stamped in the process by the dominating monopolies of the pharmaceutical companies. It has led to an increase in iatrogenic illness because a standard quantity of medicine is recommended regardless of the unique age and condition of each individual.

Western medicine has developed a highly expensive crisis model of care which people rely upon to "cure" their often self- induced illnesses. The crisis model has important uses and has increased life expectancy within the West. Longevity has no value without quality. The pursuit of health, rather than the flight from illness is central to the Chinese model of care, which only now, Western doctors are beginning to show concern.

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