

Integrative medicine and family practice

Is family practice holistic enough?

Integrative medicine is not alternative medicine or complementary medicine. It has developed within the ranks of conventional doctors and has been hailed as a paradigm shift in medicine. I will explore this paradigm shift and why it is important, especially in the family practice setting.¹

An editorial in the BMJ suggested that integrative medicine may restore 'the soul' back into medicine, its focus being on health and healing rather than on disease and treatment.²

The South African Society of Integrative Medicine (SASIM) has defined integrative medicine in the following way: "Integrative medicine encompasses a viewpoint which recognises the complex holistic nature of the physical-energetic-informational system of each individual and the uniqueness of that system. In this approach the practitioner and the sick individual form a team working towards an integrated protocol of management best suited for that person. Supporting health is a priority, using least invasive and more natural approaches. Treating disease symptomatically may be indicated but always with the full knowledge of the sick individual."

There is a great deal in this definition that points to a departure from the present approach of family practice, which has tended to follow the more narrow and radical approach of the medical specialist who is clearly intent on making a diagnosis and treating the disease as an entity separate from the whole body or person.^{3,4}

The bio-psychosocial perspective has certainly helped to enlarge this narrow viewpoint in the family practice setting, but it has not gone far enough. There is a large middle ground which has been left out, and it is this middle ground that has been filled in by integrative medicine. There is every reason to believe that it is family practice which can most enrich itself by recognising what this approach has to offer.

What exactly is this middle ground that integrative medicine has identified?

This middle ground has two main components. Firstly, the idea that as a system moves towards disease it becomes more and more dysfunctional. Examples of the dysfunctional stage include headaches, indigestion, hormone imbalances, fatigue and muscle aches and pains. With increasing dysfunction pathology begins to appear. Integrative doctors are able to identify this dysfunction and help the system to return to normal physiological function and restore homeostasis. The second fundamental idea in Integrative medicine is expanding the field of enquiry from biochemistry alone to the understanding of the role of bio-energy and bio-information.

These two fundamental ideas about the integrative process provide the family practitioner with a deeper understanding of each patient as a complex, multi-dimensional, unique web of interconnectedness with

a body-mind and spirit which cannot be separated. In this process 'healing' the person becomes a priority over treating the disease.⁵

Chronic disease is now a global burden and with the increasing aging of the population the urgency to decrease the use of chronic medication with its very high iatrogenic fallout becomes a real necessity.⁶

Lifestyle management,^{7,8,9} which includes a healthy diet, appropriate exercise, weight reduction, stress management, pollution control and making sure that the body is fed the right amounts of nutrients to optimise health, becomes essential, not only for maintenance of health but also for better function of the biological system. It is true that if an approach can optimise health it will also help to move a dysfunctional system closer towards better function. Better function means better health, and with better health the body can begin to heal.

Supporting health to manage chronic ill health seems such an obvious approach that one may begin to wonder why conventional medicine has allowed this very powerful healing tool to slip into the hands of the lay public who can find more than enough information through the internet and the hundreds of books available in the bookshops. The placebo response and spontaneous remissions of serious diseases should be enough evidence that the human system has the ability to heal itself. Integrative doctors have learnt how to add support to this process.

Family practice is the place for this kind of unique approach to develop. It is in fact where the art and science of medicine meet comfortably. Supporting the health of the body, mind and spirit in health and ill-health will go a long way to alleviating the burden of ill-health and dependency on chronic drugs.

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