

Holism, not again!

"You are completely right and you are completely wrong", said Mr Russell Farley at the close of the 7th General Practitioners Congress. You can read all about the congress in our supplement.

Russell Farley, one of the patients who spoke at the congress also summed up on the last day along with our overseas speaker, Prof Nigel Stott from Wales. Mr Farley had listened to a speaker attribute symptoms which he had had during a bereavement period to his diet at that time. He agreed, "you are perfectly right" but went straight on to say, "you are also perfectly wrong, Doctor. You see, I did eat incorrectly and that did make me feel lousy. However, you are wrong, for that does not account for the reason why I changed my eating habits."

In this issue of SA Family Practice we go some distance to look at this problem.

Borok makes a fairly straight line argument between foods, inhalents and asthma. But there are complex relationships to consider. The same disease or illness can arise from different points in a system. Farley makes his point in a way that looks at the problem of finding the cause in the manner of peeling of layers of an onion. This is indeed so in many instances when we can detect a whole series of problems behind the presenting problem at deeper and deeper levels.

Friedman, in her review of psychoneuroimmunology, describes the beginnings of a physiological understanding of holism. She is cautious not to take the argument too far, but I think one can say that she presents data from which one can postulate a different mechanism from

the linear or onion peel ones. If the immune, the neurological and the endocrine systems can all respond simultaneously and interact with one another to the same stimulus, other explanations become possible. Both the thoughts and the feelings associated with the loss of a spouse and the food working via the endocrine and immune systems could be producing the same symptoms by means of the unity of these systems. It is not necessary to understand the problem only in terms of the one leading to the other.

We still have a long way to go to understand holism in a practical way; in a way that we will truly have an holistic clinical method; an ecological way, in which we will understand our patients in their complexity and manage them with a fuller knowledge of the origin of their illness and their own healing potential.

Sam Fehsen