

Ancient Cures for Open Minds

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Humoral Sap

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By RICHARD A. SHWEDER

ONE of the surest ways to bring a luncheon conversation to a halt at the National Institute of Mental Health in Bethesda, Md., is to suggest that phlegm, bile and wind are neurotransmitters. So why then did the institute recently send biomedical scientists to India to confer with Ayurvedic physicians, who still believe that ill-sorted humors of the body cause unbalanced minds?

Despite some recent concerns over Government funding of research on alternative therapies and scoffing by skeptics, an estimated one-third of Americans are using these treatments, despite their doctors' disapproval.

Humoral medicine is a case in point. Although it was discredited in the 17th century in the West, it has made a comeback in spas, health food stores and healing centers across the country, in botanical extracts, aroma therapies, purges and holistic diets.

There is even a curiosity among some N.I.M.H. scientists, who are concerned about the high cost of drug development and who acknowledge the prevalence of psychosomatic illness. They are reevaluating alternative medicine as a body of knowledge rather than dismissing it as quackery.

Culinary Process

Humoral medicine had a long run in the West, starting in ancient Greece. In 159 A.D. sick gladiators sought out Galen, who drew on medical theories from the time of Hippocrates.

Here is a decoction of the doctrine: There are four basic humors of the body (phlegm, black bile, yellow bile, blood), four basic qualities of sensory experience (hot, cold, wet, dry) and four basic ingredients of things going in and out of the body (fire, air, water, earth). Health means harmony, and fine-tuning is possible. If the body is dry, make it wet. If it is hot, cool it off. You are what you eat, and also what you excrete.

The essence of humoral thinking, according to the historian R. M. Yost, Jr., is the idea that the human body contains juices and fluids whose ratios regulate health. When there is an

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excess of some humoral sap, the body heats up, reduces substance, separates the boiled from the unboiled parts and evacuates the stewed remains. The aim of the humoral physician is to assist this natural culinary process with warmers and coolers and to facilitate the evacuation process with purges, emetics and bleedings.

Although Hippocrates is often described as the father of medicine, Agniveśa, Sūśruta and several other ancient South Asian physicians could easily win a paternity suit. Their brain child, Ayurvedic medicine (the science of life), is an even older version of humoral thinking.

The oldest surviving Ayurvedic text, the Caraka-Samhita, probably dates from the sixth or seventh century B.C. Buddha's doctor was an Ayurvedic physician. So was the doctor of

Now, doctors aren't laughing at bodily-fluid jokes.

Morarji Desai, the Indian Prime Minister in 1979.

Official support for humoral medicine in South Asia has waxed and waned over the centuries, just as it has in the West. News of its demise at the hands of English scientists spurred its regensis in India. Indian nationalists in the early 20th century proudly rejuvenated the science of life as proof of their intellectual autonomy. Since Indian independence in 1947, the medical wisdom of the ancients has been turned into a growth industry with Government subsidies.

There are Ayurvedic medical schools, journals, pharmacies and drug companies. Lotions, potions, massages and purges are used by hundreds of millions of Hindus, for everything from wrinkles, backaches, asthma and hair loss to impotency, senility, diabetes and schizophrenia. The old remedies, preferably prescribed in Sanskrit, are thought to be closer to the truth, and are popular in contemporary Indian society, even among the Westernized elite.

In recent decades the elites in the West have been catching on, once again. One measure of this is a recent scientific mission organized by Dr. Stephen H. Koslow, director of Neuroscience and Behavioral Science at the National Institute of Mental Health. Dr. Koslow led an expedition of Western psychiatrists and pharmacolo-

gists to India to examine Ayurvedic medicine as a potential source of knowledge.

The N.I.M.H. delegation took a trip to Kerala to visit the Arya Vaidya Sala (the Pure Ayurvedic Doctor's Clinic), which uses Ayurvedic methods. There, hysteria and chronic headaches are treated by streaming medicated milk onto the patient's forehead. Asthma, inflammations of the vertebrae and other afflictions associated with dryness, desiccation and an excess of wind are counteracted with a gentle wet massage.

In the gardens of the clinic the medicinal roots and shoots of the jungle are cultivated by a botanist, who expounds the doctrine of signatures, which he attributes to Galen. "God created plants," he says, "as a provision for the health of human beings, and left a sign on them — some feature of their shape, color, habitat or behavior — for human beings to decipher." He points to a plant shaped like an ear that is a cure for ear aches.

In the factory of the Kerala clinic an Indian nuclear physicist oversees a major industrial apparatus where they distill, standardize and mass produce 2,500-year-old legendary decoctions. An M.B.A. from the Wharton School of Business takes care of the accounts. As the West lies down with the East, there are not enough beds in the clinic's nursing home to accommodate the international demand for its medical regimes.

Why Now?

Why is it now that humoral medicine, with its antique remedies from out of our past, has returned in the United States? It is the bet of some neuro-pharmacologists at N.I.M.H. that Ayurvedic practitioners know something about barks, roots, leaves and other botanical provisions for human beings that they can no longer afford to overlook.

It is also a response to recent research on the power of mind-body effects. It is the bet of some psychiatrists at the institute that Ayurvedic healers know a lot about the salubrious reality of placebo cures.

And what do they say in India when the institute comes knocking on their doors? They say it is good to experiment with things to touch, smell and eat that are tailored to your own personality, that are less biologically shocking and invasive than a wonder drug. Any medical tradition that is 2,500 years old, they say, and has a half a billion enthusiastic clients must be doing something right.