

# Medicine and its role in today's world

Dr Andrew Powell

I qualified as a doctor in 1969. Technology has since changed the face of medicine. In those days, a few daring surgeons were replacing heart valves, usually on patients in extremis. Today it is routine, and I happen to be one of the many beneficiaries. At the same time, there are huge problems with the delivery of person-centred health care, not least due to the super-specialization which has been possible through such technical advances as fMRI scanning and endoscopic procedures, as well as complex surgical advances in organ transplants and bioengineering. For physicians, too, there is the distraction of an ever-expanding pharmacopoeia for the treatment of everything from cancer to cardiovascular disease.

And yet, while some of us more fortunate individuals benefit from sophisticated interventions, healthcare on a global level is facing unprecedented challenges. To look into this requires me to step outside the consulting room and the more familiar vocational setting of doctor and patient.

The problem can be compared with the dilemma that besets a good many parents whose egalitarian ideal might be for universal state-funded education, yet who end up paying for private schooling to give their children what they hope will be the best start in life.

The titanium aortic valve that spared me an early grave could be seen as an indefensible privilege when one looks at the diseases that decimate the third world, since most medical research is geared to the treatment of conditions only afforded by developed societies. Ironically, these are also the costliest to treat since so many of their ailments are self-inflicted – the prevalence of diabetes linked with obesity, the 50% lifetime risk of cancer associated with longevity, the high rate of cardiovascular disease resulting from a high stress sedentary lifestyle and the morbidity associated with alcohol, drugs and tobacco consumption, to name but a few.

Investment in cutting-edge technology is no longer confined to the Western world. China previously relied on Classical Chinese medicine for around 3,000 years, using herbal treatments, acupuncture and medical QiGong to supplement a lifestyle of moderation and balance based on Daoist principles of healthcare. There is an old saying in China, 'Calling for the doctor when you are ill is like having to dig a well when you are thirsty!' This tradition of preventative medicine in China is rapidly being supplanted by Westernisation of diet, lifestyle and acute medical interventions.

The practice of medicine contains the seeds of a fundamental problem for humanity. Of course we wish to help our fellow human beings with the skills at our disposal. The root of the word medicine comes from the Latin verb *mederi*, to heal or remedy. The noun *medicina* means 'the art of healing'. This goes hand in hand with Hippocrates' famous saying: 'Cure Sometimes, Treat Often, Comfort Always'. Yet the tap root of Western medicine lies deep in the soil of reductionism, a movement that began in the Renaissance with the dissection of the human cadaver and leading to the identification of organ function; thence to a mechanistic understanding of the human body, and now, abetted by neuroscience, to a concerted attempt to reduce the human mind to the physical substratum of the brain. Holism, the lynchpin of Eastern medicine, runs counter to the thrust of Western medicine. Despite the early promise of PNI (psychoneuroimmunology), medical research continues to focus on the part rather than the whole.

This is hardly surprising, for Western medicine is, archetypally speaking, a product of the penetrative male mind that has become dissociated from the feminine principle of union with Nature as sacred. Yet I am not reproaching medicine (as if that were possible), for mainstream medicine is a social institution and simply mirrors the mind-set of society at large, one that puts the part before the whole. Otherwise human beings could not behave in the wanton way that we do, despoiling the planet and killing large numbers of our own kind (testosterone should carry a health warning, for no sooner than it brings life to the womb, it dispatches it on the battlefield).

We know that the greatest benefits to the health of a given population come through the right kind of diet, exercise, good housing, effective sanitation, sobriety and responsible sexual behaviour. Add to this the proper management of childbirth (I won't call it obstetrics because the word medicalizes a natural process) plus vaccination against the epidemic diseases of childhood, and from the perspective of the species, humanity would have been well served. The natural lifespan would have been reasonably extended, and were it to be coupled with an agreed limit on family size to two children, the problem of caring for a burgeoning geriatric population, with its complex care needs, would be manageable.

If we could only stop there! But of course, we can't and don't. What is happening is unstoppable; humanity is set on a course driven more by intellect than wisdom and enchanted by technologies that excite rather than caution. The result: in a mere couple of hundred years human beings have put a large question mark against the survival of the species.

Medicine is inextricably bound to the achievements and ambitions of modernity, which at best has pioneered life-saving prostheses like heart valves and yet at the same time makes and sells junk foods that clog the arterial tree. At best, it has saved countless lives with the help of antibiotics. Yet, due to their profligate misuse, we now have bacteria that are resistant to every known antibiotic and which will soon return us to the days of Lister and antiseptics. At best, thanks to Edward Jenner's

historical researches, we have eliminated smallpox. Yet the avian and human flu viruses have just been genetically combined and are thus capable of human-to-human transmission (we are told there is no danger as the hybrid virus is safely secured in a bio-lab!) At best we can perform liver transplants, yet we make billions from the sale of the alcohol that causes cirrhosis. At best we can vaccinate against the sexually-transmitted human papilloma virus that causes cancer of the cervix. Yet we now are facing a pandemic of HIV due to a culture of sexual promiscuity.

In the field of mental health, which has been my specialty, severe mental illness, namely bipolar disorder and schizophrenia, continue to have prevalence of around 1% each, regardless of nationality, culture or ethnicity. We still don't understand what is really going on, treatment is symptomatic, and cure remains a pipe-dream. In addition, psychiatrists and general practitioners are expected to treat a social epidemic of human misery, now labelled depression, which works greatly to the advantage of the pharmaceutical industry. Why so much unhappiness? Perhaps because consumerism, material realism and the breakdown of traditional values in the post-modern world have exacerbated a culture of anomie first described by Emile Durkheim over 100 years ago. I call it loss of soul, individually and collectively; something that mainstream psychiatry, still bent on scientific credibility, has yet to take into account.

We do our best to highlight the relevance of spirituality to mental healthcare in the activity of our special interest group at the Royal College of Psychiatrists. The interest is there, for one in six UK psychiatrists now belong to the group. But other than mindfulness-based cognitive therapy, and the influence of the 12-step approach to addictions, spiritually-informed treatments are not generally available within the NHS. Transpersonal therapies, like most complementary and alternative medicine, have to be sought in the private sector, which does not provide the kind of evidence base needed to secure wider recognition.

So, to return to the round table theme of 'transforming medicine', I have to say that I don't see any great transformation taking place. Advances in technology are accomplishing wonderful things, yet we are in danger of losing the human face of medicine. To use a well-worn metaphor, our fascination with the car may lead us to forget the driver.

My comments may seem alarmist, yet from the perspective of the non-dual wisdom tradition, there really is nothing to be shocked about. Everything *has* to be exactly the way it is; if it could have been any other way, it would have been; it wasn't, and it isn't! The human drama is played out on a stage of dualities that shape every aspect of human life. Is it so surprising that that the scourges of the Middle Ages, smallpox, leprosy, bubonic plague, are being replaced today with drug-resistant TB, malaria, and HIV? Epidemiologists have already warned us that unrestricted air travel, coupled with urban conurbations make global pandemics a case of not if but when.

It is only natural to wish to avoid disability, and physical or mental suffering, and to hope for long, healthy and happy lives. Medicine practiced honourably can play its part. Yet the destructive aspect of the human ego continues to play havoc with the fate of humankind, leaving charities like Medecins Sans Frontiers to do what they can to treat injured, traumatised and sick refugee populations in one war zone after another.

Many view the ubiquitous suffering of humanity as an evil to be overcome on the way to a better future; activists of all persuasions, outraged by the abuses that permeate society, give heart and soul trying to fix the world in the hope of a kinder, more compassionate society.

The non-dual perspective does not anticipate the eradication of evil, for on the world stage where dualities are played out, evil is the inevitable counterpart of good, just as where there is health there is sickness. Each person fulfils their role; there are those who care for humanity just as there are those who do not. All a person can do is to listen for, and respond to, their inner voice. When love arises, it does so not because there is an enemy to be defeated - the mythic battle of the light against the dark - but because of a quickening of the soul. Just as in the growing embryo ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny, so the soul reminds us that each individual life is a little wave on an ocean of universality.

Should humanity ever come to appreciate that all life is one, a great deal of the suffering that medicine aims to alleviate will be relieved, since most anguish that accompanies the human condition is on account of loneliness, isolation, fear of loss, and the burden of life lived without connection to source. In the meantime, the physician helps as best he or she can not forgetting I hope, that a little kindness goes a long way.

I, like many others, am indebted to Medicine, never mind its imperfections, for the opportunity given to my little wave to continue a while longer. And when that wave is spent, I'll hope that the good doctor, if one should be in attendance, has the wisdom to treat death with the same reverence as life.

Prepared for the Scientific and Medical Network Round Tables Conference on  
'Transforming World-Views in Science, Medicine and Psychology' 5 -7 July 2013

© Andrew Powell 2013