

WHAT IS INTEGRATIVE MEDICINE, ANYWAY?

“When religion was strong and medicine weak, men mistook magic for medicine; Now, when science is strong and religion weak, men mistake medicine for magic” ~ Thomas Szasz, *The Second Sin*

I am often asked, and I think it is a good question: “What is integrative medicine?” In this post I’ll try to explain. I’d also like to touch on other medical philosophies including functional medicine.

First — some background. It goes without saying that as a society we have become exponentially technologically advanced. Medicine in particular has made stratospheric advancements.

Our modern medical system does wondrous things. I fractured my right ankle on a backpacking trip (a story for another post) and I am grateful every day for the medical technology and physicians that made it possible for me to walk and run normally again.

In some ways though it feels that we have lost something fundamental as we’ve emphasized this technological approach to disease. We are really good at fixing acute and immediately life-threatening conditions but we are not as good at healing the chronic conditions like obesity, fatigue and mental health problems that plague us.

We really have less of a “health care system” and more of a “disease care system.” And it literally comes with a cost. In 2009 the U.S. spent \$2.5 trillion on healthcare (17.6% of GDP) and about \$8,086 per U.S. resident. But for all the expenditure by many measures we are no more healthy for it.

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At its core Integrative Medicine embodies a philosophy of healing-oriented, patient-centered care. It focuses on the least invasive, least toxic and least expensive methods to help facilitate health. It integrates all healing traditions including “traditional” allopathic and complementary therapies.

Functional Medicine is similar. It seeks to deeply address the underlying causes of disease using a systems-oriented approach. It emphasizes the partnership between patient and practitioner.

Western, Allopathic Medicine is focused mainly on specific diseases and isolated symptoms. Functional medicine, on the other hand, takes a more systems-based approach.

Integrative Medicine and Functional Medicine offer better alternatives to our current healthcare system. While my training is in Integrative Medicine I embrace the Functional Medicine paradigm wholeheartedly as well.

Healing does not always equal curing. We can “cure” high blood pressure with a medication without healing the patient. Healing would involve facilitating additional changes that reduce stress, improve diet, promote exercise and increase the persons’s sense of community.

When we merely cure or fix a problem or symptom the cure often fades and sometimes another problem surfaces in its wake. Only with a whole-system, comprehensive ideology can we achieve true wellness and healing.