



Making Sense of our Health Care Crisis

by Marcia Smith, ND, PhD

A 3-year study conducted at Johns Hopkins University concluded that 3 out of 4 Americans will die of a chronic disease (*Philadelphia Inquirer* (11/30/2000)). With new diseases being named on a regular basis, there is growing concern about what is really happening. In fact, a recent Harris Poll noted that concerns about our health are one of the key factors keeping us awake at night.

The emergence of many chronic diseases has occurred only since the beginning of the 20th century. Before the 20th century most people died of infectious diseases (from viruses or bacteria). Since most are now dying from chronic diseases, the question we should be asking is not only "What is the cure?" but also "Where are these diseases coming from? What is the cause? and Why are these chronic diseases proliferating now?" The last three questions are not generally being asked and the answers are essential for real movement toward health and away from our current health crisis.

The Current Medical Paradigm

The United States has the most sophisticated and effective system of crisis care in the world. Even taking that into account, the World Health Organization gave us the rank of 37th place in terms of our overall health—despite the fact that the United States is ranked in 1st place in the world with regard to healthcare expenditures. These statistics, combined with the statistics on chronic disease, are so dramatic that you would think that there would be a shock wave in the medical system and a huge coordinated effort to find the underlying causes. I don't see evidence of either. It appears to be business as usual in the medical world—treating the symptoms and hoping for the best. Medical Doctors do a commendable job in helping the acutely ill, but it is time that they reevaluate how they think about health, i.e., what is the nature of disease and what is health?

The current medical paradigm clearly is not working. The system of mainstream medicine in the United States holds a lot of power over all of us...including Doctors and their associates. We are in a sort of "hypnotic trance" about disease and illness. We are led to believe that the cure for disease is just around the corner as soon as new drugs and/or procedures are discovered. This paradigm presupposes the possibility of finding a single cause for each disease and that the discovery of the cause will lead to a single drug or class of drugs that will "cure" each disease.

The ongoing, multibillion dollar "War on Cancer" (declared by President Nixon)—still not won after 30 years—and the many "Races for the Cure" maintain the illusion that it is only money that keeps us from "the cure."

The current medical paradigm prevents individuals from truly understanding the state of their health. Doctors are treating disease labels—not assisting us in building our health. Since chronic diseases often have no "cures," doctors simply manage the symptoms as best as they can. I have had many clients tell me that they were "healthy" despite multiple diagnoses and a long list of prescribed medications. Their definition of "health" was the absence of symptoms (because their drugs kept

their symptoms under control) and “not missing work.” Even when there is a “cure” identified, this does not equate to restoring health—only to an absence from the disease-label. With regard to Cancer, you are technically considered “cured” if you are cancer-free 5 years after diagnosis. Not only may the “cure” (the treatment) have left you ravished, but, if the Cancer recurs more than 5 years after diagnosis, you are still counted as one of those who was cured.

The Process of Defining Disease Contributes to the “Hypnotic Trance”

The power to name implies the power to cure. Here lies the crux of Medicine’s hypnotic trance. Western medicine generally translates a symptom or complex of symptoms into a disease name. Some diseases are referred to by the organ involved. For instance, there is the general term Heart Disease. Other disease names are the translation of symptoms into Latin or Greek. The disease Lupus is a good example of the translation process. The Lupus patient typically has a rash on the face similar to the mask-like pattern on the face of a wolf. Lupus is the Latin name for wolf—thus the name Lupus for the disease. The patient is usually relieved to have a diagnosis. The diagnosis validates the patient. The problem is that having a disease name often creates an artificial reality or illusion that there is a cure, and if not now, there will be one “someday.”

The process of translation described above does not, in fact, contribute to a cure. All it really does is create a kind of communication shorthand. The name and code number allow doctors to communicate amongst themselves and obtain insurance reimbursement. It also enables controlled studies to be done so that drugs, specific to the name of the condition, can be created. Unfortunately it also fosters a recipe-book approach to treatment—one drug or class of drugs for each separately-named disease. A current example of this is the “statin drugs” for Heart Disease.

What Actually is a Disease?

Robert Aronowitz, MD, Associate Professor at Robert Wood Johnson Medical School discusses the disease definition issue in his insightful book **Making Sense of Illness** (Cambridge University Press, 1998.) In that book he makes the distinction between *specific disease* and *individual sickness*. Dr. Aronowitz defines *specific disease* as essentially a mental construct created by a committee of doctors and scientists; *individual sickness*, he says, is the unique experience of the individual and may not always fit into a convenient definition. Dr. Aronowitz describes in detail the definition and naming process involved with *specific disease*. *The essence of this process is clear in his quote from Dr. Charles Rosenberg, Professor of History and Sociology of Science at the University of Pennsylvania. “In our culture a disease does not exist as a social phenomenon until we agree it does.” In other words, a disease doesn’t actually exist until we say it does! Chronic Fatigue Syndrome* is a good example of how the condition did not become real until a group of doctors agreed that it did. For many years prior to the naming of the *specific disease*, there were thousands of individuals experiencing symptoms of chronic fatigue.

Dr. Aronowitz would classify those symptoms as their *individual sickness*. Those who were suffering were very frustrated because their doctors often didn't believe in the reality of what they were feeling. Many were told that the symptoms were psychosomatic. Finally there were so many people presenting with the same or similar symptoms that a formal process was initiated to define and name the group of symptoms as a legally recognized *specific disease*.

The creation of a name for this illness really did nothing to solve the problem! In fact many chronic fatigue sufferers felt frustrated with the disease name that was chosen since it was only the description of their symptoms. They apparently would have felt comforted if the symptoms had been translated into Latin or Greek. Chronic Fatigue Syndrome is now widespread. Few doctors are looking for the cause or asking the important question, “Why now?” Yet, those who have finally been diagnosed somehow feel a sense of relief. They are entranced by the fact that they finally have a name. Their doctor is now taking them seriously and will now acknowledge their sickness; the symptoms are no longer “just in their heads.” And with the diagnosis, the patient assumes there will be a cure. Unfortunately, that supposition is an illusion—part of the hypnotic trance. There is no cure in sight, and from my experience, it is unlikely that a cure will come from mainstream science

and medicine alone. I trust these examples will clarify Dr. Aronowitz's distinction between *specific disease* (the legal definition)—Lupus or Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, and *individual sickness* (the individual's specific set of symptoms).

Hopefully you are now clearer about how the naming process contributes to the “hypnotic trance.” As long as the medical system is centered around disease names, not individuals, there will be little progress in dealing with chronic disease. ***Most disease names are descriptions of symptoms, not causes!***

While the hypnotic trance surrounding disease lingers in our culture, you have a choice to make. You can continue to subscribe solely to the symptom-treatment approach and the “one disease, one class of drug” theory, or you can embrace a new health consciousness—a newly emerging natural health paradigm—a complementary approach which includes medications where absolutely needed. The natural health paradigm teaches that symptoms are, in fact, the very language of the body alerting you to poor health!

You can be thankful that those symptoms are alerting you that there is a problem in the body's regulatory mechanisms. The symptom-suppression approach of modern medicine is actually turning off your body's warning signals. It is similar to taping over the warning light in your car and continuing to drive or grabbing a mop (instead of turning off the faucet) when your sink is overflowing onto the floor! Getting you to a symptom-free state only through the use of drugs does not address the real causative issues and does not provide you with true health. In fact, artificially eliminating symptoms often drives the problems deeper and provides you with a false sense of security. Your symptoms, with or without a disease name, are only the “tip of the iceberg.”

Real healing requires numerous lifestyle changes that can move you towards optimal health and away from chronic disease. You will need to deal with imbalances in your body's regulatory mechanisms—compromised due to the 20th century modernization process itself. It is a long-term process!

A Helpful Way to View the Situation

Donald O. Rudin, MD, longtime Director of the Department of Molecular Biology at the Pennsylvania Psychiatric Institute, has created a very succinct term to describe the chronic diseases of the 20th century. The name he chose is not a description or translation of symptoms; it is a description of causes—The Modernization Disease Syndrome. (A syndrome is a complex of disease manifestations grouped under an umbrella and treated as a whole.) Dr. Rudin states that underlying this syndrome are imbalances in the regulatory mechanisms of the body resulting from “changes in lifestyle factors involving exercise, stress, smoking, drugs, pollutants, and especially a multiplicity of interacting dietary modifications which have not...been evaluated for their collective effect.” In short, the modernization process has been an uncontrolled experiment with disastrous ramifications for our health. He puts special focus on the repair of nutrient deficiencies—making it clear that we will not solve our current healthcare crisis until we: 1) take our focus away from treating separate disease entities; 2) Understand the effects of the modernization process; and 3) focus our creativity on finding practical solutions to reverse the effects of that modernization process.

The Iceberg Of Chronic Illness

The Iceberg of Chronic Illness is a pictorial representation of what I have presented here. The “tip of the iceberg” is *individual sickness*—whether or not it has been translated into a *specific disease*. Biological stressors, many of which are delineated in Dr. Rudin's quotation above, are the causes which are below the *water line*. They represent a much greater part of the iceberg. Biological stressors produce dysfunction in multiple systems, precipitating a complex of symptoms. As an individual resolves these biological stressors, the whole iceberg (including the tip) will naturally begin to shrink. Sometimes the tip will shrink to the point where *disease* disappears, i.e., the individual loses his or her disease label. Individuals on medications to treat the tip of the iceberg by alleviating the symptoms, will usually need to continue the medications during the process, reducing them under the guidance of a professional, while working to shrink the iceberg and to strengthen the *terrain* of the body. In other words, you need to resolve the biological stressors and repair the key areas of dis-

turbed regulation in the body.

Many doctors and health consultants educated in the emerging natural health paradigm are using symptoms (*individual sickness*) as clues to the imbalances *below the water line*. They understand that biological stressors are, in fact, the cause of chronic conditions. These stressors are often intertwined—each person having a unique combination of many biological stressors along with their own genetic predispositions. These health consultants suggest various lifestyle and dietary changes that are known to address the Modernization Disease Syndrome. They are teaching the value of detoxification from various environmental pollutants. They also understand that deficiencies in key nutrients can cause imbalances in four regulatory systems: 1) Immune system; 2) Endocrine system; 3) Gastrointestinal system; and 4) Cellular communication system. A dietary deficiency can not be corrected with drugs or anything else other than the missing nutrients—vitamins, minerals, amino acids, essential fatty acids, phytochemicals, and glyconutrients.

A Vision For The Future

I see there will be many creative solutions to the health problems precipitated by the modernization process. Progress will be made as we all: 1. break the hypnotic trance of current medical thinking; 2. turn our inquiry and resources toward understanding the nature of the ***Modernization Disease Syndrome*** in all of its many, intertwining manifestations, and 3. invest our time and financial resources in finding creative solutions to our health problems.

You can be part of the solution to our current healthcare crisis by taking the responsibility to explore and shrink your own “iceberg,” and by sharing the process with others.

You must be the change you wish to see in the world.

Mahatma Gandhi



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