



Functional Medicine: Bridging the Gap

By Scott Vander Wielen, DC

The Journal of the American Medical Association published a commentary by Dr. Halsted Holman of Stanford University Medical School which outlined two transformations that has occurred in health care in the past 50 years. Dr. Holman points out that the dominant health problem is now chronic disease instead of acute disease. Secondly, the role of the patient has had to change dramatically.

However, the Institute of Medicine asserts that there have not been changes to the delivery of health care and medical education since 1910. As a result, “both health care and medical education remain with basic structures and practices designed for acute disease.”

Acute diseases are short term conditions. There is a standard treatment for all patients with the same symptoms. For example, if a patient goes to the doctor for a severe sore throat, the doctor will most likely order a throat culture. If an infection is detected, a course of antibiotics would be prescribed. The doctor is usually able to effectively care for his patient with a short office visit and the role of the patient is passive.

On the other hand, a chronic disease is a condition that is developed over time and is long term. There is not one effective treatment for all patients with the same symptoms. Since the development of the condition is different for each patient, an effective treatment plan must be individualized. The doctor must take the time to understand the patient’s entire health history. This requires an attentive doctor that knows how to listen and understands how chronic conditions are developed.

Currently, there is a gap between the needs of the patient with a chronic disease and the health care the patient receives in standard medical care. Functional medicine is an approach to health care that bridges that gap.

The Institute for Functional Medicine explains, “Functional medicine practitioners must look upstream” to consider the complex web of interactions in the patient’s history, physiology, and lifestyle that can lead to illness. The unique genetic makeup of each patient is considered, along with internal (mind, body, spirit) and external (physical and environment) factors that affect total functioning.”



Let's look at high blood pressure as an example. The underlying cause of high blood pressure may be due to stress, heart disease, liver/ gallbladder problems, problems detoxing to name just a few possible factors. The best treatment plan would take the patient's individual health picture into consideration. This is a prime example in which the standard treatment for high blood pressure would not be the most effective and may even do more harm than good.

“The focus of functional medicine is on patient centered care, promoting health as a positive vitality, beyond just the absence of disease.” In this approach to health care, the doctor serves as a knowledgeable guide and the patient takes on an active role. Ultimately, the patient is empowered to take charge of their own health and can change the course of the disease.

References:

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