

Seeds of Meaning, Transformations of Health Care, and the Future

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THE YEAR 2010 WILL BE REMEMBERED as a turning point in health care. The country with the world's largest single economy, The United States of America, has created a health care system for many of its people. Thirty-two (32) million of the 47 million uninsured Americans will be covered by the new health plan, including the youngest and the sickest. One of the most incredible aspects of the new law is its embrace of prevention and health promotion. The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010 (Section 4001), creates the National Prevention, Health Promotion and Public Health Council.¹ Headed by the Surgeon General, this new policy coordinating council of the U.S. government will be run by several cabinet members and will be advised by complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) practitioners. Among other things, the council is tasked to consider innovative, evidence-based models and policies to promote "transformative models of prevention, integrative health, and public health on individual and community levels across the United States." It is now the task of the CAM and integrative medicine community to use this new visionary piece of law to transform health care.² If we do not take this chance to redefine health, wellness, and health care, a broken system, teetering on collapse will shatter. Our actions will help define the direction for the future of health care, not only in America but worldwide, because the lifestyle habits of people in the United States of America might just become its greatest export.

The system is broken for many reasons. The United States spends more on health care than any other country; yet, in comparison to other industrialized nations, our health is 37th,³ and infant mortality is 30th.⁴ The United States spends more than \$2 trillion annually on health care.⁵ To put this into perspective, this is almost as much as the *entire* gross domestic product (GDP) of the United Kingdom or Italy, and more than the GDP of Brazil.⁶ The most preventable and deadliest chronic diseases, such as diabetes, cancer, hypertension, mental disorders, and heart disease are costing the U.S. economy \$1 trillion yearly and this figure will grow to \$6 trillion yearly by 2050.⁷ Much of this expansion of sickness in America is projected as a result of the aging of the Boomers. In 2011, the first of the 78 million baby boomers will turn 65.⁸ On this note, the authors of the Wellness Initiative for the Nation (WIN) document, which helped to inspire the new council described above, write: "Our health care system is a broken disease treatment system, and the time for change is well overdue."⁹ Adding 32 million people

to a broken system is not a viable solution, and if anything only makes it worse.

The most obvious and impactful approach to transform health care is to shift focus from restorative therapeutics to prevention and health promotion. The role of behavior and lifestyle change on overall health, prevention of chronic disease, and epigenetic changes is profound. The European Prospective Investigation into Cancer (EPIC) study of 23,000 individuals showed how changes in lifestyle behavior could lead to prevention of diabetes (93%), heart attacks (81%), strokes (50%), and cancers (36%).¹⁰ The INTERHEART study of 30,000 individuals demonstrated a 90% prevention of heart disease by changing lifestyle.¹⁰ It is estimated that two thirds of chronic illness can be prevented by lifestyle behavior change.⁹ Lifestyle changes even effect epigenetic changes.^{11,12}

This shift of focus from fixing problems to promoting health is one way to begin the transformation, especially if it extends to education,¹³ public policy,⁹ and advertising campaigns.² But even such a tectonic shift would not go far enough. Even if people exercised,¹⁴ improved their diets and maintained healthy weights,¹⁵ quit smoking,¹⁶ and learned to meditate,¹⁷ the system would still be broken. The health care system grew out of an era of scientific empiricism, mechanistic thinking, and an overreliance on a reductionist "objective" truth. This system is not designed to help people get well, thrive, and flourish. Individuals are being told to change their behaviors, their very *life's* style, so that they won't get sick, won't die early, and, it is hoped, live a better life. This is still an approach based on linear causation rather than wholeness, systems, and human depth. It is not about the compelling benefits of living life to the fullest, thriving, and accessing one's unique potential.¹⁸

Embracing a systems and holistic orientation toward health and well-being implies an inclusion of body, emotion, mind, spirit, family, and community. How can we include all of those, embracing the emerging evidence based models for CAM and integrative medicine, in such a way that we can: help people to make the changes they need to at the right time; assist practitioners to embody self-care; and also set an agenda for policy, implementation, and a visionary transformation of health care? What we need is a totally new approach that integrates all of the myriad solutions strewn throughout the CAM and integrative medicine literature.

A new level of thought-leadership is required of the CAM community. There is a long history in the CAM traditions of prevention, promotion, well-being, and wholeness.

This history needs to be coupled to the emerging evidence based models and embedded into the philosophical maps being created. For example, in a recent article on integrative oncology, Geffen describes the central challenges to the system of health care, especially in terms of cancer.¹⁹ He emphasizes the importance of oncology because, "1 in 3 women and 1 in 2 men alive today are expected to be diagnosed with cancer at some point in their lives."¹⁹ Geffen proposes several ways integrative medicine can move forward with a multi-dimensional approach to the whole human. He even suggests that meeting the patient's emotional and spiritual needs is part of the doctor's role. Finally, Geffen calls for practitioners to embrace self-care, a deeper and more empathic approach to suffering, and a consensus about "healing vs. curing" within the profession of medicine. It is in such a call for consensus that CAM and integrative medicine could lead together. In fact, an article I recently coauthored with Epstein and Lemberger on Reorganizational Healing,¹⁸ not only shares many commonalities with Geffen's overall approach, but grew out of a CAM tradition rooted in an embodied modality and model of "healing vs. curing."²⁰ It is this type of coupling of traditions, of breaking down the old barriers between CAM and conventional medicine, which will support the visionary leaders to step forward. By embedding the consensus on healing to the long tradition of CAM with the latest evidence-based and transformative models, medicine and health care can be renewed.

In 1999, Jobst, Shostak, and Whitehouse wrote about diseases of meaning.²¹ Their metaphor was simple, compelling, and transformative: "disease is a manifestation of health."²² The metaphor is simple because it points out the not-so-obvious in such a way that it seems like a given. The maladies of our modern, affluent world, from cancer to depression and heart disease to obesity, are seeds from which each individual, culture, and society can grow meaning. The metaphor is compelling because it directs us away from the way things are normally done, such as viewing symptoms and disease as "things" that can be fixed, cut out, or prevented. Disease, instead, is the natural response in a living system to a perceived imbalance or threat. They write: "perceived meaning and the way it affects how life is lived is at the root of all disease." Our current system of health care appears to have no context with which to embrace such a profound truth. *Just by contemplating it, we are compelled to seek greater meaning.* Their metaphor is transformative because it demands we re-envision the way we view reality, the way we act in the world, and the way we enact things in our world. Accepting their metaphor requires us to transform everything about health care, disease care, wellness care, and ultimately, well-being. Disease, then, can be viewed as a catalyst to develop a new sense of a person's role in his or her own life; a new connection to the body, emotions, spirit, family, community; and even that person's ancestors. Transformative indeed!

In order for a new system to come into being, the older one must fall apart. The broken and collapsing U.S. health care system is based on a view of the world that no longer makes sense. As the world grows more complex, so does the way we construct for ourselves what the world means.²³ We must adapt and develop in our own complexity, if we are to embody new and more integral modes of being, healing, growing, and evolving.²⁴ Fundamentally, we are *all* deeply connected: we share a world; we have hearts beating in our

chests; breath filling and emptying our lungs, moment by moment; and life pulsing through us. This year, 2010, was a year that went by in the vast history of our people, of our world, of our universe. Can we embrace its gifts to move forward with a new vision? Can we go deeper and find more ways to bring more people greater depth of meaning, ease of living, well-being, and joy in life? Let us do this. Let us gather the seeds and plant anew so that our children's children may live to be proud of us.

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