

**Letter from Hygeia by William Shepherd**

Thirty years ago I read *Medical Nemesis* by Ivan Illich...part of a larger body of work about the 'disabling professions' and their 'radical monopolies'. Last year a friend sent me *Healthy Aging* by Andrew Weil and six months later *Spontaneous Healing* was recommended. From these two books, written ten years apart, it was clear that Dr Weil had devoted his professional life to developing a response to Illich's critique of modern Western Medicine. Ten years on, with politicians in the UK discussing the future of the National Health Service it is also clear that Weil's lifetime's work has important policy implications. The image on this page is from Gustav Klimt's painting of the Greek goddess Hygeia, while much of the text in this dispatch comes from Weil's writings.<sup>1</sup>

In Ancient Greece, doctors worked under the patronage of *Asklepios*, the god of medicine, but healers served Asklepios's daughter, the radiant *Hygeia*, goddess of health. For the worshippers of *Hygeia*, health is the natural order of things, a positive attribute to which all are entitled if they govern their lives wisely. The function of



medicine is to discover and teach the natural laws, which will ensure a healthy mind in a healthy body.

In contrast the followers of *Asklepios* believe that the role of the physician is to treat disease, to restore health by correcting any imperfections caused by accidents of birth or life.

Here is Dr Andrew Weil:

'Imagine a world in which medicine is oriented toward healing rather than disease, where doctors believe in people's natural healing ability and emphasize prevention above treatment. In such a world hospitals would resemble spas, where patients could practice healthy living, learn to prepare healthy food, learn to take care of the body's physical needs and learn to use their minds in the service of healing.

Even in urgent care facilities, technology would be used to help the healing system, as by stimulating regeneration of damaged organs. The best ideas and methods of conventional and alternative medicine would be available to all patients.

In this world doctors and patients would be partners working toward the same ends, with malpractice litigation a rare event rather than a commonplace. Insurance companies would happily reimburse for preventive education and natural treatments, knowing that these efforts were in their own best interests.'

What stands in the way? Dr Andrew Weil has identified the main obstacles:

- Medical education is frozen in a disease-oriented mode. The training of doctors remains a brutal initiation that makes it very difficult for students to maintain healthy lifestyles and develop the mental and spiritual qualities of healers.
- Insurance companies dictate how medicine is practiced by their policies of reimbursement. They will not pay for most of the interventions described in this book because they say they do not have research data to support their effectiveness or their cost-effectiveness compared to conventional treatments.
- Research on healing and on alternative medicine is primitive or nonexistent because the people who set research priorities and disburse research funds are not interested in these fields.
- The biomedical model from which medical scientists work stifles movement toward *Hygeian Medicine*. From that model's materialistic perspective, doctors can easily dismiss most of the ideas in this book as unscientific and unworthy of investigation.

<sup>1</sup> Sources: *Spontaneous Healing* by Andrew Weil (Little, Brown and Company, London, 1995, ISBN 0751516805). A more recent title is *Healthy Aging: a lifelong guide to your physical and spiritual well-being*; (Random House, New York, 2005, ISBN 0375407553). For further details visit <http://integrativemedicine.arizona.edu/about/directors/weil>.

And what are the remedies for this situation? Here is Weil again:

‘I believe that the root problem is medical education. If future doctors were taught alternative models of science and health, were encouraged to study the healing power of nature, and were allowed to develop themselves into healthy role models for patients, all the obstacles listed above would begin to melt away. These new doctors would want to do the research that will eventually change standards of practice and lead insurance companies to spend their money in better ways.

They would know how to take belief projected onto them by patients and reflect it back in ways that increase the occurrence of spontaneous healing. They would be able to design and staff new kinds of health care institutions and they would recreate the trust between doctors and patients that make lawsuits unthinkable.’

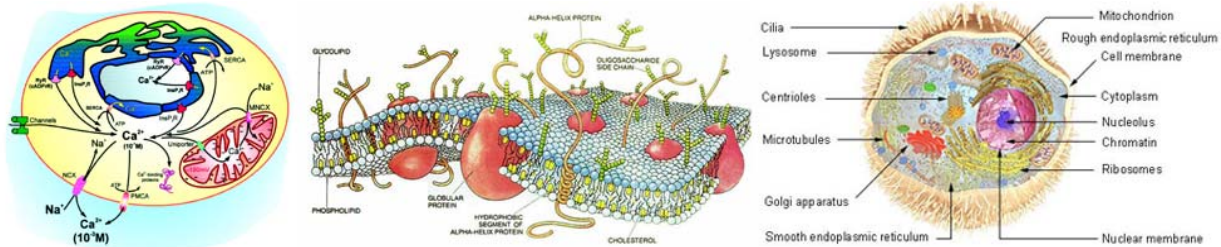
Having said that Weil was sceptical about the prospects for radical reform of medical education, even though he was committed to trying to bring it about. His scepticism went back to his days as a first-year medical student in 1964... reinforced by his experience on a medical school faculty.

‘Many of my classmates at Harvard had majored in humanities rather than science as undergraduates, and many were not sure they wanted to be doctors. We were a restive group and we were dismayed by the quality of instruction we received in our basic science course. Instead of being taught how to think about science and health, and learning general principles of human biology, we were inundated with masses of detail that we were expected to regurgitate in frequent exams. Many of us had experienced much better teaching in college, and we complained bitterly.

The faculty put us off by saying that a brand-new curriculum, the product of much work by committees and subcommittees, was to be unveiled in the second semester: an integrated curriculum that was to be a model for medical schools of the future. What you are getting now is the old stuff, they told us, so please stop complaining and be patient.

Came the first day of the new curriculum. Instead of studying traditional subjects like embryology, anatomy, physiology, and biochemistry, we were now going to study systems of the body, and the first unit was to focus on the heart. An embryologist delivered an incredibly detailed sixty-minute lecture on the embryology of the heart. Then an anatomist gave an equally detailed lecture on cardiac anatomy. And so on for physiology and biochemistry.

At the end of four hours, we were dazed, confused and angry. This was supposed to be integrated teaching? It was integration by juxtaposition, nothing more. And I am sorry to say that in all the years since, I have listened to committees and subcommittees proposing ideas for curriculum reform and there has been no progress whatsoever. It all amounts to reshuffling the deck and dealing out the same cards in a different order.’



Buddhism urges practitioners to discard the grey filters of habitual perception and see the miraculous nature of everyday experience. Beginners at meditation often imagine the goal to be attainment of unusual states of consciousness: out-of-body experiences, visions, celestial choirs heard with the mind's ear, psychic powers, and so forth. But Zen masters teach that such experiences are irrelevant to the process of spiritual development and should not be given special attention if they occur. Instead, they direct students simply to sit and pay attention to the most ordinary aspects of existence, such as the rising and falling of the breath.

We hardly notice the ordinary activities of the human body's healing system. Think of all that can go wrong: constant bombardment with radiation that can damage DNA; millions of cell divisions every second, any one of which could result in a genetic accident; countless molecules of irritants and toxins that get into our systems through every possible point of entry; forces of wear and tear that abrade our tissues; pressures of aging; the sea of viruses, bacteria, and other potential agents of disease in which we live; not to mention emotional assaults that stress our nerves and threaten mind/body equilibrium.

To make it from one day to the next without serious incident is nothing short of miraculous. Each day in which we enjoy relatively normal health testifies to the activity of the healing system. Its inestimable value lies not in its ability to produce remissions of disease but in the maintenance of health through the vicissitudes of daily life. The ordinary is truly extraordinary. The body wants to be healthy, because efficiency is the ratio of work done to energy supplied, so it takes less energy to be a healthy person than a sick one. And just as a driver does not pay attention to the sound of a well-running engine, people are invariably unaware of their good health until it breaks down.

How would you experience optimal efficiency of the healing system? Very likely you would not be aware of it, because we tend to pay little attention to our health when it is good. You would recover speedily from illness and heal from injuries uneventfully. Ordinary stresses of everyday life might annoy you but would not derange your digestion or blood pressure. Sleep would be restful, sex enjoyable. Aging of your body would occur gradually, allowing you to moderate your activity appropriately and live out a normal life span without undue discomfort. You would not contract heart disease or cancer in middle age, be crippled by arthritis in later life, or lose your mind to premature senility. Weil has spelt out what is meant by the radical reform of medical education:

- Basic instruction in the philosophy of science, with reference to new models based on quantum physics that replace old concepts of Newtonian mechanism and Cartesian dualism. Such instruction would include information on probability and gambling theory, would discuss possible interactions of the observer and the observed, and would present models that could account for the non-physical causation of physical events.
  - Instruction in the history of medicine with reference to the development of major systems like traditional Chinese medicine, homeopathy, and osteopathy.
  - Emphasis on the healing power of nature and the body's healing system.
  - Emphasis on mind/body interactions, including placebo responses, medical hexing, and psychoneuroimmunology.
  - Instruction in psychology and spirituality in addition to information about the physical body.
  - Reductions in the amount of factual knowledge students are now required to memorize to pass certifying examinations. If students learn how to learn and know the general structure of knowledge in the various medical sciences, they will be able to look up the details as they need them, especially as this information becomes available in computerized formats.
  - Provision of practical experience in the areas of nutrition, exercise, relaxation, meditation and visualization. Students should be evaluated not only on factual knowledge but on personal progress in developing healthy lifestyles.
  - Practical experience with the basic techniques of alternative medicine, such as herbalism, nutritional medicine, manipulation, body work, breath work, acupuncture and guided imagery, in addition to the basic techniques of allopathic medicine.
  - Instruction on how to design and conduct research in medicine and how to evaluate published research.
- Instruction in the art of communication, including interviewing patients, taking medical histories and presenting treatments in ways that are likely to activate the body's healing system.

Weil's belief in the need for a medical education curriculum grounded in a *Hygeian Paradigm* is shared by Dr Bruce Lipton,<sup>2</sup> author of *The Biology of Belief*, a book that was ready to be written a quarter of a century ago but did not see the light of day until self-published in 2004. Bruce Lipton's website is an excellent resource for *The New Biology* that 'thinks beyond genes'. In *The Biology of Belief* Lipton praises the work of six scientists<sup>3</sup> who pioneered the new biological paradigm at the end of the last century.<sup>4</sup>

Weil has one further recommendation. He would like to see the creation of a *National Institute of Health and Healing* within the *National Institutes of Health*. Its mission would be to investigate all healing phenomena, including spontaneous remissions of cancer and other diseases, placebo responses and faith healing.

'The present *Office of Alternative Medicine* should operate within this organization with a greatly expanded budget to conduct research on the efficacy of alternative treatments and their cost-effectiveness compared to conventional treatments. Another goal of the *Institute of Health and Healing* should be to develop a *National Registry of Healing*, classified by diseases and extensively cross-referenced. This information should be available to all health professionals and patients, so that if you develop scleroderma, for example, you can obtain a list of persons in your area of the country who have experienced healing of scleroderma, and you or your doctor can contact them to discover what steps they took.

The specifics of healthcare differ from country to country, but in all countries conventional medicine is caught in an economic crunch because of its reliance on inherently expensive technology. Doctors, hospitals and universities are starting to consider [new] ideas about health care. A powerful consumer movement is responsible for a renaissance of alternative medicine worldwide and the growing openness to it within the medical profession. The time is right for change.'

<sup>2</sup> Lipton's forte is as a teacher (*The Biology of Belief* is ghost-written) so his DVD on *The Biology of Perception & The Psychology of Change* is worth the £35 price-tag. This 2001 DVD blends the biology of belief and the psychology of change...arguing for the inseparable nature of the mind/body connection. (2 hours, 40 minutes; available from the website at <http://www.brucelipton.com>).

<sup>3</sup> Szent-Györgyi (*Submolecular Biology* 1960); Heinz R. Pagels (*The Cosmic Code* 1982); Candace Pert (*Molecules of Emotion* 1997); Tore Norretrander (*The User Illusion* 1998); P.W.Nathanielsz (*Life in the Womb* 1999); and Rita Laibour (*EEG & Neurofeedback* 1999).

<sup>4</sup> The new paradigm has risen from the ashes of the old *Gene Determinacy* dogma that has ruled since its invention by Watson and Crick half a century ago...aided and abetted by the academic priesthood's deep-rooted fear of a renaissance of the *Lamarck Heresy*...see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lamarckism>.