

Losing Sight of Caring for the Whole Person

by Georgianna Donadio, D.C., M.Sc., Ph.D.



If I had a dollar for every time I heard the words “specialty” or “specialize” these days, I would be a very rich woman. Indeed, these are among the new buzzwords and for good reason. Given the increased competition and expansion of healthcare options, specialization - even among “natural” or “alternative” health care providers—has emerged as the way to stand apart in today’s consumer driven economy.

Thanks in part to the Internet, increased communication and a fast-paced economy, competing for the health consumer is only expected to become more and more prevalent in the next few years. What is getting left behind in the clamor to stand out as a health provider in either the allopathic or alternative fields is the quality of care. What once distinguished “alternative” health care providers—mindful and respectful listening to the individual and being present in a way that addressed their needs as a whole person—has been slowly replaced by practicing or promoting the specialty that we have been trained and are experts at.

Critics of allopathic medicine have for a long time pointed to the specialization and fragmentation of health care services as the “demon” to creating an integrated, whole person health care system. And yet, today, we see alternatives to allopathic medicine being practiced in this same fragmented, specialized way.

The practice of nutrition, herbs, energy healing, body alignment, yoga, meditation, aromatherapy, and so forth, are primarily offered to the consumer without an integral whole picture of how healing takes place. Specifically, how our body functions as an integrated, homeostatic living being and how the specialty sciences that we call “alternative healing modalities” enhance or assist the function of our overall health on a physical, emotional, nutritional, environmental or spiritual level. The modalities of alternative care are now being offered in the same way medical specialties have been over

for years; now, we just have more items on the menu to choose from.

What is also disconcerting is the fact that alternative health care practitioners are no better educated in integrated anatomy and physiology than most allopathic practitioners are. One of the legitimate criticisms of alternative health care is the lack of evidence-based knowledge on the part of the practitioner to explain the effective outcomes from their application. Alternative practitioners, like their allopathic counterpart who focuses on prescription writing as a cure, are woefully uneducated in the evidence-based sciences of human anatomy and physiology as well as lacking an authentic education and understanding in whole person science.

When I began my practice in the early 1970’s the alternative practitioner was often seen by the suffering individual who sought their assistance as “an angel of mercy”. Today, it’s quite a different story. It is a sad testimony to the popularity of alternative health care that in the dawn of the 21st century people are more confused, less informed and even less aware of how their bodies work and how to take care of themselves over their lifetime than they were thirty years ago!

Now, I often hear people confiding that they are disappointed with the alternative health care profession, and feel that there is the same focus on selling product or treatment plans as there has been in the medical practices they used to turn to. No longer do alternative practitioners spend the time they once did explaining and demystifying the process of disease and the cause and effect of where it comes from, but rather are busy selling the latest product of their trade or re-scheduling people for their next ten visits of care. Economic success has come to alternative health care and with it the same demons that have plagued the practice of allopathic medicine for many years. Success is a strange bedfellow. If we lose the very essence that crafted our

success once we achieve it then indeed we have lost our personal and professional integrity.

The premise behind alternative health care is the knowledge and ability to address the whole person rather than just one isolated aspect of health. The five aspects of health include the physical, environmental, spiritual, nutritional and emotional. The threat of the specialization of alternative health care, attacks the very core of this practice. More and more practitioners today are specializing in physical areas of the body or specific conditions or diseases such as chronic fatigue syndrome or environmental allergies. This specialization is creating isolation where practitioners are failing to treat the whole person. Countless studies have shown the effectiveness of treating the whole person in a relationship-centered, education-focused model of practice.

Whether an allopathic, alternative or holistic health practitioner, we must establish or continue a practice whereby we are treating the entire person and addressing the bigger picture of their illness or presentation. Given rapidly rising chronic diseases such as diabetes and obesity, it is our duty to remain true to this integral approach to healing and serve our patients in the way they want and need us to. I issue this battle cry to health practitioners across the country — fight specialization and favor treating the Whole Person. It is only with such an approach that we can begin to solve that which ails us.

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