

Honoring a Patient's Inner Wisdom

By Irene Switankowsky

This article was first published in *Humane Medicine*, Volume 8, number 1, 2008

To become and remain healthy, the patient should guide his/her own health care and develop a partnership. How can the patient provide guidance to the physician? This paper, will assert that the physician must rely on the patient's inner wisdom about his/her state of health. Before a patient gets seriously ill, (s)he usually has an intuition that something is wrong, although (s)he cannot necessarily demonstrate it. The patient may suddenly not be able to sleep or (s)he may feel excessively tired and drained. The patient must feel comfortable enough to bring these intuitions to the physician's attention so that (s)he can investigate further. In the absence of this intuitive wisdom, many diseases are missed or misdiagnosed, ending in premature death. Thus, physicians should encourage patients to "tune into" their inner wisdom and discuss these intuitions openly and without hesitation.

However, before a patient can share such intuition with a physician, (s)he must learn to tap into this wisdom. Most patients have such an intuitive sense, even if it is not fully developed but some patients simply ignore their inner wisdom. If they feel tired, they push themselves even harder. If they feel irritated, they hate that aspect of themselves. This disrespectful attitude towards self may lead the patient to stifle his/her inner wisdom and, over time, lead to serious health problems. To make matters worse, some individuals do not trust their intuitions and hence go further astray. This is a serious error and one cannot achieve good health unless one recognizes his/her inner wisdom.

This paper will assert that a patient's inner wisdom is an important resource with which to achieve accurate diagnoses and thus sustain health. Part I shows that a patient must honor his/her inner wisdom in order to be an equal partner in his/her health care. Part II, shows how the physician-patient relationship is strengthened as a result of this. Finally, Part III discusses how good healthcare cannot be achieved without taking the patient's intuition into consideration. Standard medical practice alone cannot offer a complete interpretation of disease because it fails to consider the emotional elements of human illness.

Part I . Honoring Inner Wisdom

It is especially important for patients to honor their inner wisdom during the clinical encounter for example by paying close attention to his/her pain sensations. Pain is a signal from the body that there is a possible imbalance. Many patients ignore such signs. This is a mistake because the body can tell the patient a great deal about the state of his/her health. The patient honors the inner wisdom by accepting that one's bodily sensations can be a guide to better health.

Most of all, a patient should learn to trust his/her inner wisdom as an early warning sign of illness. For his/her part the physician must be open to receiving such information and to act upon it.

A patient can follow his/her intuitions by paying attention to sudden variations in fatigue and sleep patterns. For instance, if a patient is still tired after adequate sleep or is unable to get a full

night sleep, this could point to imbalances and possibly the beginnings of disease. Usually such symptoms point to abnormalities that are in an early stage and, if recognized early enough, can be corrected at the cellular level, for instance by a vitamin or other supplement. Our bodies are constantly offering us information about imbalances or dysfunctions at an early stage. We must be ready to be guided by such information.

For instance, a woman was perfectly healthy throughout her twenties and thirties, until she married a man who was psychologically abusive. Within six months of their marriage, he betrayed her by sleeping with her long time friend, which destroyed her reputation at work, and put all her friends at a distance. At this time, she was in her early forties. Suddenly, she could no longer sleep more than two or three hours a night, she developed sharp pains in her abdomen and a severe depression. She went to her doctor and told him that her sleep patterns had changed, that she was always irritable, and that she felt completely drained. The physician sent her for a series of diagnostic tests. The mammogram showed abnormal tissue growths in her right breast. He also sent her to a specialist who inquired further about the sudden changes in her life. She told her story of constant stress and abuse and said that she was in the process of leaving her spouse. The specialist arranged for a second mammogram one month after she had left her spouse to see if the abnormal tissues were stress related. The second mammogram showed that the lumps on the right breast had all disappeared. In addition, her sleep patterns returned to normal, and she had made a few new friends. Thus physical changes can occur at the cellular level when a person is exposed to undue amounts of psychological stress. The body had signaled these imbalances to the woman, and, fortunately, she had paid attention. After the stressors were removed, her health returned to normal.

However, it was important that this woman had disclosed these initial intuitions to her physician. This may have saved her life. Patients should be encouraged to notice any changes in their lives such as stress and the perceptions of abuse that may reflect early imbalances. Note that the physician cannot access such information unless the patient discloses it to him/her. In this way, the patient and physician can become equal partners in the administration of health care. The physician has the medical knowledge to alleviate a patient's physical symptoms, while the patient has important intuitive knowledge of changes in his/her life that precipitate stress or lead to unhealthy stress or imbalances. Lastly, sometimes a patient's intuition of bodily imbalances may be an early sign of disease and, if acted up, can lead to the early detection of disease with great benefits to both patient and physician. In our previous example, the woman's intuition helped her to discover that her life, as it was, had to change if she was to regain her health and live free from psychological stress and disease. The woman's intuition and her expression of these difficulties helped the physician become aware of her altered state. The woman's inner wisdom also helped the specialist avoid needless surgery.

Part II. Using Inner Wisdom to Strengthen the Physician-Patient Relationship

The physician-patient relationship can be strengthened if a patient's inner wisdom becomes a diagnostic resource during the clinical encounter. This requires that the patient and physician form a kind of partnership with adequate give and take between them. The patient and physician have specific responsibilities in this partnership: For instance, it is the patient's responsibility to clearly and honestly communicate his/her inner wisdom to the physician. It is the physician's responsibility to take the patient's disclosure seriously. However, the patient must ensure that (s)he communicates his/her inner wisdom carefully and succinctly to the physician. Here, the

patient should strive to be brief, precise, and clear.

Some patients will not be able to achieve clarity and brevity when they set out to express their inner wisdom. Others may not be able to “tune into” their inner wisdom. Some patients fear turning inward because they feel a sense of nothingness and emptiness. Most people can begin to tap into their inner wisdom through meditation but this requires considerable patience. Some patients have had to meditate for a year or so before they can “tune into” that part of themselves. Others may be naturally introspective. In any event, the more practice an individual gets, the more proficient (s)he becomes at tapping into his/her inner wisdom.

A patient’s expression of his/her inner wisdom strengthens the physician-patient relationship in several ways: First, the patient becomes a partner in managing his/her own health care when he/she tells the physician their intuitions and thus save time and effort for the physician and health care system. Also, patients may commit themselves to protect good health e.g. eating right and exercising more. This gives the patient a sense of control over his/her health. Lastly, the physician and patient will share a common goal.

Second, the patient’s expression of his/her inner feelings and wisdom helps the physician understand the patient more completely. Empathy can greatly improve and strengthen the physician-patient relationship. If the patient becomes seriously ill, the physician is already close to the patient through the earlier empathic association and hence will be more supportive and reflective. Third, by interacting in this way, patient and physician achieve a more meaningful encounter, which over time strengthens the physician-patient relationship. In addition it is the enumeration of symptoms that may lead to a diagnosis, the encounter also focuses on and considers the patient’s inner wisdom. Thus the clinical encounter moves towards a more humane and enriched level in which both physician and patient benefit.

Part III. Inner Wisdom and Humane Medicine

Humanism is a doctrine, attitude, or way of life centered on human interests or values; a philosophy that stresses a patient’s dignity, worth, and capacity for self-realization through reason. In medicine, humanism becomes manifest through caring relationships between healthcare providers, patients and their families. A “patient-centered” approach focuses on the patient as the subject of care, emphasizing the centrality of the patient’s values as well as his/her body and soul as the recipient of care. Humane health care may better serve patients and their representatives by keeping them connected with their families and healthcare workers. In addition, such care can honor a patient’s inner wisdom, which can be a valuable diagnostic and healing tool.

A humane approach to practice in the current environment requires a combination of competencies in relationship-centered skills and values, which take time to acquire and develop. Also it may be more difficult to apply the humane approach to some patients to whom the physician does not emotionally connect, perhaps because of differences in culture or experiences. Also, patients who are self-aware, are not ready to trust their inner wisdom. However, the physician who cares deeply about the patient can bridge many cultural, experiential and societal obstacles. The longer a physician and patient know each other, the easier it is to form a close bond.

In short, a patient’s inner wisdom can enhance their humane health care and assist the development of patient-centered medicine, in which the patient is treated as a whole. An important part of treating the whole person is to honor his/her intuition and inner wisdom.

Physicians trained in the science of medicine may be tempted to see the search for and recognition of “inner wisdom” as an unreliable way to approach the patient and their illnesses. However, if physicians are to provide humane health care, they must expand their medical parameters to include the patient’s spiritual and personal dimensions.

Conclusion

The patient-centered approach advocates the honouring of and respect for a patient’s sense of personhood and intuition (“inner wisdom”) in every clinical encounter. The physician must encourage the patient to speak out when they believe something is fundamentally wrong; it is never permissible to ignore a patient’s inner wisdom during the clinical encounter particularly when it may lead to diagnosis. When the physician takes the patient’s inner wisdom into consideration, he or she feels more in control of his/her health care. Our culture has turned outward. There is more noise, violence, drugs, alcoholism, and poor health than ever before. By encouraging a patient to turn inward, patients and physicians would be taking a step towards alleviating such distractions and fostering good health.