

Ecological Medicine: An Idea Whose Time Has Come

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Most of us who joined the ranks of alternative medicine practitioners share the feeling that somehow the mainstream way of doing things is seriously off-kilter. We became wholistic practitioners because we sensed this approach to healing was in alignment with the way of nature - the *Tao*. It was the most effective way to help people come to wholeness. The emphasis has been working with people one-on-one. We work with individuals who come to us for help regarding their health. We harbor the knowledge that our environments, our lifestyles, our food and our work often are contributing factors to the diminishing health of the individual and that we often feel like Sisyphus pushing a boulder up a mountain, but doomed to never complete the task. What would happen if instead of focusing on the individual, we began to broaden our "scope of practice" to incorporate the health of the planet?

This question is at the core of ecological medicine. Kenny Ausubel, the founder of the Bioneers conference, also is a leader in this movement and has written a concise article that encapsulates the wisdom behind ecological medicine.

Ecological medicine is based on the simple premise that the health of the individual is integrally connected to the health of the habitat. Ausubel has listed some basic tenets of ecological medicine:

"The first goal of medicine is to establish the conditions for health and wholeness, thus preventing disease and illness. The second goal is to cure. The earth is also the physician's client. The patient under the physician's care is one part of the earth. Humans are part of a local ecosystem. Following the ecopsychological insight that a disturbed ecosystem can make people mentally ill, a disturbed ecosystem can surely make people physically ill. Medicine should not add to the illnesses of humans or the planet. Medical practices themselves should not damage other species or the ecosystem."

We are living in an age of tremendous environmental upheaval. Since the Industrial Revolution and more recently with the advent of the three most damaging industries - the petro chemical, nuclear and biotechnical industries - the health of living beings on the earth has been put in peril. We are witnessing one of the greatest mass extinctions that have ever occurred. We are experiencing the effects of 80,000 new compounds that have been introduced since World War II. We are producing tons of low-level radioactive waste and significant levels of high-level radioactive waste. We are destroying the rainforests - "the lungs of the earth." We are consuming (via our food, air and water) significant amounts of dioxins, heavy metals, xenoestrogens and other immune- and endocrine-modulating substances. Pharmaceuticals are showing up in the ground water, lakes, streams and rivers, poisoning the aquatic life and us.

According to Samuel Epstein, chairman of the Cancer Prevention Coalition (www.preventcancer.com), cancer rates have steadily increased since the middle of the last century with no real change in mortality. The almost 40-year war on cancer, started by Richard

Nixon, has been a failure. The billions of dollars that have been spent have gone toward institutions, research into "cures" and treatment. Hardly anything has been spent toward the most powerful way to stop cancer - prevention. The GreenMoney Journal (www.greenmoneyjournal.com) has an excellent article called *Reversing the Cancer Epidemic*, by Samuel Epstein. It is a must read. Epstein argues that until we do something about the millions of tons of carcinogens in the environment, we will never make significant progress toward stopping cancer. This is not a new idea. Prevention is a hallmark of Chinese medicine and I believe that we can do much better toward this end.

Ecological medicine is based on the precautionary principle, which is the idea that a new technology should be presumed guilty until proven innocent. The counter-principle, which industry and technology (including the medical-industrial complex) have been using, is called the "risk paradigm." This paradigm says that it is the burden of society to prove that a new technology or substance is harmful. This model assumes that there are "acceptable" risks outweighed by the benefits of the new technology. Usually, we are so taken by the upside that is foisted upon us by the people who will directly profit from the technology that we tend to not want to think about the downside, which is unknown until it arises many years later when it is much more difficult to retrieve what has been unleashed.

Ecological medicine is fostering a global effort to replace the risk paradigm with the precautionary principle. One group doing exemplary work in the realm of cleaning up medicine, Health Care Without Harm (www.noharm.org), takes the Hippocratic oath seriously. They want to replace all mercury thermometers with non-toxic thermometers. They want to end the practice of incinerating medical waste products laced with dioxin and DEHP (a phthalate linked to a myriad of health issues), which eventually end up in our bodies. They want hospitals to be green and buy green. These are just a few of their listed projects and goals. Visit their Web site and see what they are up to.

As primary alternative health care providers, we are in the unique position to widen the scope of our intent and practice. We can provide information that people can then act on. We can educate our patients about the bigger picture. We can make our own practices greener. We can link up with like-minded organizations and individuals who are pushing for the same changes that we are. There was a study done that compared the thought processes and attitudes of pilots with surgeons. The question posed to both groups was: "Would you welcome or discourage someone pointing out to you that you were about to make a mistake?" The pilots all welcomed the information. The surgeons mostly did not welcome such advice. What is interesting to note is that a pilot would directly be affected by their own mistake while a surgeon would not. We all are pilots here!

Let's support and jump on the ecological medicine movement. We naturally are far along the path. Our tools of trade are stainless steel needles and cotton balls. Let's call for non-bleached cotton balls. Let's question the gases and compounds that are applied to the needles. Let's push for non-toxic sharps containers. Let's make sure our offices are using recycled paper, non-toxic building materials, non-toxic cleaning products and the like. Can we commute to work efficiently? Can we make our homes as green as possible? Can we reduce our own footprint? It is no longer a private matter. We as alternative, wholistic practitioners need to view our practices as examples of how we want to live. It may be very inconvenient, as Al Gore tells us, but what are the alternatives?

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