

Current Cultural Issues and Ayurveda

“The Unexamined Life is Not Worth Living”

--Socrates

The history of Ayurveda is significant when juxtaposed with modern medical practices. Ayurveda evolved as a system of health care as a result of *meditation* on the part of ancient rishis or wise people. These were leaders in the community who were concerned about the health and spiritual well being of their communities and who wanted to find solutions to the plagues that were devastating their villages. The system that evolved placed emphasis on how to prevent disease or how to balance minor illnesses before they developed into full-blown diseases. The science of Ayurveda is complex and the ancient texts that enumerate its wisdom are voluminous. However, when Ayurvedic principles are put into practice, maintaining good health becomes elegantly simple: eat well, get plenty of rest, breath deeply, move gently, make sure that you have a daily bowel movement and love yourself as well as your fellow humans and the environment.

Contrast this with our modern medical model that requires doctors to work mind-bendingly long hours. Extended work shifts were instigated by a renowned American surgeon named William Stewart Halsted. He became addicted to cocaine after exploring (on himself) how this drug could be used as a local anesthetic. He went to a sanatorium where he was put on morphine to cure him of his cocaine addiction—then causing him to be addicted to morphine until the end of his life. While individual allopathic doctors may have high moral and ethical principles of caring for their patients, they are at the mercy of the evolution of western medical model itself. The purpose of this article, however, is not to claim that there is no place for the heroic life-saving technologies and methods of Allopathic medicine. The different heart/mindset of the founding “fathers” of modern medicine versus Ayurveda opens up a discussion large enough to fill several books. For the purpose of this article, I simply wish to raise awareness about how political, cultural and market forces are squelching an individual’s rights to choose the method of health care that most resonates with him or her.

There is a bill that the Wisconsin State Legislature is considering that will limit the healthcare freedom of our community members. If passed, people who give nutritional advice will either have to be licensed with the Wisconsin Dietetic

Association or possess some form of specifically designated licensure (chiropractors and acupuncturists will be able to give nutritional advice). While it may seem easy to argue that this bill is keeping people safe from “quacks” that give bad advice, it would prohibit professionally-trained homeopaths, Ayurvedists and other holistic practitioners from guiding people to eat healthily. To read the complete bill (SB 115) please visit <http://www.legis.state.wi.us/2009/data/SB-115.pdf>.

There are some red flags that reveal that this bill is more concerned with power and money mongering than keeping people healthy/disease-free. Some of the Wisconsin Dietetics Association sponsors include: Pepsico (\$20 billion annual sales); The Coca Cola Company (\$7.6 billion); Mars, Incorporated (\$21 billion); Colgate Palmolive (\$15.3 billion) and General Foods (\$13.7 billion). For a complete list of WDA sponsors visit http://wihfc.com/WDA_Sponsors.htm.

We can observe glaring examples of the market-driven American idea of proper nutrition by looking at the advertisements posted on none other than the walls of our medical clinics. When I was in the waiting area of our local urgent care clinic to be treated for Strep Throat, I noticed a large poster advertising diet soda (targeting people with diabetes) including a not-so-subtle Coca Cola trademark. Any person with an ounce of research skills can find plentiful studies that show the deleterious effects of aspartame (a key ingredient in diet soda) on the human body. Could my Ayurveda teacher, who eloquently explains the physiology of how aspartame poisons the nervous system, really be considered a person who is giving people bad advice? The fact is, the Coca Cola company gets its pockets lined with each new diabetic patient who believes that drinking diet soda will help slow the progression of their disease. What the advertisement does not divulge, is that long-term drinking of diet soda causes people to have tremors similar to those that happen in the cases of Parkinson’s disease. Visit <http://www.sweetpoison.com/aspartame-side-effects.html> for more information on aspartame. Ayurvedic practitioners, on the other hand, recommend wholesome drinks to their diabetic clients that will not cause harmful side effects.

In all fairness, I have heard rumors of holistic health care providers who instruct their clients to throw away all of their medications and use only natural/nutritional means for overcoming illness and disease. My Ayurveda teacher taught me as well as all of my colleagues (which included two M.D.’s) that we were never, under any circumstance, to encourage people to stop taking

their western medications. Our teacher instructed us to stay within a safe scope of practice: educate and support our clients to have a cleaner diet and simpler lifestyle. In this way, the Ayurvedic practitioner is a *complementary* advocate for their clients' health. Ayurvedists do not have daily patient quotas and do not bill insurance companies so we have ample time to *educate* people regarding how they can take personal responsibility for their own health and well being. I recently had a conversation with a physician friend who admitted that, on the whole, doctors do not have time to educate their patients on self-care. In his words, "Doctors fail when it comes to education." Again, I am not vilifying my doctor friends, but simply pointing a finger at antiquated bureaucratic functioning of hospitals and clinics. According to my friend, if a doctor does not meet their daily quota of patients, they are reprimanded and retrained on how to see as many clients as possible on a given day (hurray for more profits and more uneducated people)! Again, we see the negative results of a market/profit-driven healthcare—or sick care—system.

Perhaps there is a need for a licensing procedure for Ayurvedic practitioners, homeopaths and other holistic practitioners who will be harmed if this bill passes, but certainly this extreme Dietetics bill is not the answer. Ayurveda survived British colonization in India and I predict it will survive the economic and political colonization currently being carried out by American big business lobbies. In India, Ayurvedic Practitioners went "underground" until India gained independence and now Ayurveda is again enjoying the above board respect that it deserves. One would think that the "free world" could come up with an intelligent solution that would not restrict a person's right to seek advice from whomever she or he wishes. The history of Ayurveda in India shows that whether under or above ground, Ayurvedic principles are enduring and true enough to survive any daft legislation that comes its way.

If you agree with the ideas presented in this article, please make your voice known by writing to your state representatives. Bills are being passed right under our noses that will have a direct bearing on our freedoms to life, liberty, free speech, the pursuit of happiness and healthcare (not sick care). Call or write Senator Kathleen Vinehout and Representative Sandy Pasch to express your opposition to the WDA licensing bill. If these are not your representatives or you are not sure who your representatives are, please visit:

<http://www.legis.wisconsin.gov/w3asp/waml/waml.aspx> or call the Legislative Hotline: 1-800-362-9472. Feel free to send me an email and I will give you a prepared letter that you can sign and send to your representatives:

patricia.wickman@gmail.com. Like the smallest Who in Whoville that saves the town at the end of Dr. Suess's *Horton Hears a Who*, it is time for us as individuals to shout out a hearty YOP!!! and make our democracy work for us and not for big business lobbies.