

Holistic Health: The Doctors View

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The article focuses on the main themes of a study among a group of Icelandic doctors and nurses who have a special interest in holistic health. Holistic health is defined in various ways but most definitions centre on looking at the persona as a whole and taking into account physical, emotional, mental and social needs of the individual. (For a discussion on holistic health definitions (see Sveinn Guðmundsson, 2010, Strandberg, Ovhed, Borquist, & Wilhelmsson, 2007).

Here the focus will be on the doctors and their views on holistic health. The article begins with a short overview of the history of dualism to set the stage. Then follows the doctor's discussion on how they became interested in ideas on holistic health, the turn from dualism to holism, what holistic health means to them, how it is influencing medicine and finally their views on complimentary and alternative medicine (CAM).

The mind and the body

The ancient Greeks in around 300 BC to c. AD 400 begun viewing health in connection with bodily functions instead of explaining illness in relation to evil spirits as had generally been done before. Mind and body were considered as one unit (*monism*) until Plato separated them with his view of the mind as something abstract and the body as a physical being (*dualism*). Hippocrates (460-377 BC) subscribed to this dualistic view of the human being and believed that disease was a matter only concerned with the body and the mind was independent of the process. In the fifth century after the Roman Empire collapsed views on disease and health changed as the spread of knowledge slowed immensely and illness was again explained as the work of demons or as a punishment by God. The church took over the domain of medical knowledge, priests became healers and the mind and the physical body was again seen as one. This view remained until the scientific revolution in the 1600s when René Descartes pronounced that the mind and the body are separate entities although they may interact with each other. The body was now considered a physical machine and physicians reclaimed the medical domain. Since then the focus has been on the body and physical evidence in relation to disease. This became the fundamental basis of modern Western medicine where the dualistic view of mind and body is considered the norm (Lyond & Chamberlain, 2006).

Robbie Davis-Floyd a medical anthropologist and Gloria St. John a former hospital and clinic administrator use the term “technocratic model of medicine” to describe modern Western medicine. The model describes the change from interconnection to separation, organic view of the body to a mechanical view and turning it over to scientific investigation. Feelings, personality, social context and spiritual beliefs defied the scientific measurement and were therefore discounted (Davis-Floyd & St. John, 1998).

This short discussion on the changing views of the mind and the body, its connections and disconnections in Western history shows the way from monism to dualism and the modern dominant mechanical scientific view of the human being.

Methodology

The study is a qualitative research using semi-structured interviews and participant observation to gather data. The purpose of the study is not to generalise about all Icelandic health professionals, their views on holistic health and related matters. Instead the aim is to contribute to increased understanding on the subject by interviewing doctors and nurses who have expertise knowledge and experience of holistic health, integrated medicine, CAM and connected fields of interest.

The doctors are both general practitioners and doctors with various specialties focusing on specific part of the body although the former are in greater numbers than the latter. All participants are given code names in the article.

Dualism and holism

In the interviews the doctors discussed their views on health and science and most of them had strong opinions regarding the separation of the mind and the body in modern medicine. Guðmundur says that dividing the human being into body and spirit is a demonic method and disturbs the treatment process. Haukur wants to break down the separation of mind and matter regarding the body and health. To him it is a one inseparable whole. Daniel agrees, he does not want to look at it as a relationship, he says that the body and the mind belong together because they are the same thing. There is no cooperation on something that is one thing. To Haukur new information about how the brain works like the fact that the brain changes in reaction to his surroundings is an example of this point. He believes that this knowledge is coming into medicine and will change the way we view the brain, the body and health.

Eiríkur has read a lot about dualism and the body and soul division and his conclusion is that it is simply wrong. To him the division was convenient in the past for the Catholic Church to consider everything physical as inferior to the spirit and should be repressed to control people. Eiríkur sees it as the opposite, the mind and the body are on the same level and the body is good with all its urges. He is seeing this intense connection in his work as a doctor, to him there is no distinction between the soul and the body, it is a “soulbody”. This is a view he implements in his work as a (specialized) doctor. As he gets further into medicine it is becoming clearer day by day the enormous affect the mind and the emotions have on the body. To him it is so great that it cannot be taken apart.

Daniel does not see the individual as divided into parts but as a whole. Body and mind work together and the subconscious is active in everything we do, diseases affect our mental state and our mental state affects our diseases. One example he gives is arthritis, which is a disease that can very easily affect your mental state, and you can become depressed. The depression causes more arthritis symptoms and the mental and physical pain support each other. Just being nervous, tired or stressed can affect the arthritis. Psoriasis disease is another example he gives that is deeply connected to the person’s mental state. To Daniel it all hangs together because it is a whole.

Eiríkur believes the reason behind the visits of more than half of the patients that walk into his office, whether they know it or not, is of mental origin. He says that there have been research that shows these results in other countries and he imagines that the numbers must be even higher in the general practitioners office.

Pétur is delighted about religion and science beginning to connect the way they are today after being divided for about 500 years. He is well read in the holistic and integrated medicine literature and keeps up with the latest developments in these matters. He says he is a practical man and wants to use the knowledge no matter where we get it from to make our world a better place.

The doctors consider the dualist view on mind and matter in relation to health to disturb them in their work. They look beyond it and towards a holistic view of the human being.

Holistic medicine

The general practitioners in the interviews feel a strong connection between their field and the holistic view and some even see a possible division within medicine in the future. Daniel thinks that medicine is developing towards a holistic mode of thinking and that everything in society is catching on not just concerning health but also with regards to the environment. He sees it as a paradigm shift, an awakening; people are trying to leave the dualism and the body and embracing holism. Daniel says that the health professionals around him are very aware of these holistic approaches and are into them. They go to meditation seminars and discuss matters along these holistic lines. He says a great deal of physiotherapists, masseurs and psychologists are incorporating holistic views into their work. Other health professionals are beginning to notice this and even doctors within the specialties but especially people who are always looking at the whole.

Haukur mentioned that it is well possible that medicine will divide into two sections, the holistic doctors on one hand and the specialists with their reductionist view and focusing on their chosen part of the body on the other hand. Daniel says that if medical specialization continues in this reductionist way these doctors will become more like repairmen than doctors. Jóhanna mentions the vastness of modern medicine and that most doctors have ventured so deep into their own field that they have become great scientist in small units when they should be concerned about the whole.

Daniel views general practice as a profession that thinks in a holistic way and to him it is very natural that general practitioners are more open to holism than others. He says that the general practitioners around him know that these things are connected although their approach and the methods they use may vary. Daniel thinks that if the general practitioners did not incorporate this inherent holistic view in medical school they will do so in their practice because it is very hard to go through their daily routines without realizing it. Júlía has a similar view, she says that when you begin working as a general practitioner and become experienced you see that what you learned in medical school is not enough and then you begin opening up to other possibilities. She says that you do not have to practice for many years to realise that medicine is just one methodology, one approach. Medicine is very important but it does not answer all the questions because your patients and life do not follow the textbooks.

Daniel also names rehabilitation doctors, paediatricians and many psychiatrists as being especially open to holistic views on health and Jóhanna adds geriatric doctors to the list. This is because they address so many different health factors and have a wide approach although not all general practitioners are as open-minded as she would like them to be. Doctors who have a narrow focus may find it more difficult to connect with such an ideology in Daniel's view although this of course varies depending on the individual doctor. Jóhanna considers younger people more open to holism than older people because it's more a part of their culture but there is no general rule about it and there are a lot of older open-minded doctors also. All in all she feels there is an awakening in these areas everywhere. To Daniel this holistic view may originate with the general practitioners and other "wide" medical professions and then spread out to others.

Some of General practitioners feel that their chosen field within medicine supports a holistic view and their experience working with patients proves that. The doctors believe that medicine is slowly changing from a reductionist and dualistic approach

to a more holistic one and some say it is a sign of the times. Although they hesitate to generalise they make a distinction between the holistic part of medicine and the reductionist part.

The mindbody

Although the doctors share a similar view on health and the way the human being works as a whole they have their unique personal outlook on the subject. Eiríkur is a strong believer in the power of positive thinking and says that the opposite, negative thinking, worrying about everything and having a grim view on life is simply bad for your health. You are more receptive to diseases and have a harder time recovering from them. Pétur says that what you think, what you eat, how you exercise, how you avoid stress, how well you rest, your relationship with your environment, your neighbour, your family and society affects what diseases you get and how healthy you are. Therefore it is important to realize how these factors are influencing your life. This he says is proven today by various research that demonstrate the power of the mind and what the individual can do by himself regarding his health. According to Pétur one scientist after the other is coming to the same conclusion that we need to listen to our body because our body is our subconscious mind.

Jóhanna says that if you fix your diet but not your soul then nothing really changes. Pretty soon you are right back at square one because it is all connected and you need to work with these things side by side. She says that although the physical part of health is important it cannot overshadow areas such as mental and social health and our position within our family or society is also extremely important regarding our health. The same goes with old traumas. She says she sees in her patients a connection between traumas and physical diseases. People's self identity is shaped by the traumas and today it has been researched how childhood traumas change the way our brain develops and how the nervous system and other bodily systems work. To Jóhanna it has been proven and is very clear that people's mental state affects the body. One example is obesity where a serious trauma can change your self-identity so much that you lose faith in yourself, have trouble with boundaries and develop a bad connection with your body and look for outside consolation. She emphasizes the fact that repressed traumas find some way to surface and when we realize what we are repressing and begin dealing with it the physical symptoms begin to disappear.

Peter talks about the importance of changing the way we think so that we are not as receptive to the negative influences in our environment, which can result in a disease. By worrying about getting a disease we are more likely to get it. Jóhanna speaks in a similar vein, people need to get to know themselves, how they think, why they think the way they do and how they can change the way they think. She says that people need to do everything they can to take care of their health and use physiotherapy; Cognitive-behavioural therapy and various therapies that can help us maintain a good health. Then for the serious cases where everything else has failed then we should use drugs and surgery. She wants to offer people a chance to work with all these things, to get a holistic approach and help from professionals in all areas. It is her dream to work in such a place and work with people who take responsibility for their health and together they can find out what is the best solution instead of people following the "health experts" blindly. Jóhanna wants to be an advisor to her patient and help him on his way with the best available options no matter where they come from. She wants to be able to work with professionals in other fields and be able to discuss the progress of the patient with them and together work on all fronts regarding the patient's health. That way guarantees the best end result in her opinion.

Pétur wants people to stop being narrow minded regarding these matters and read all the latest studies about mind and matter and related subjects with an open mind. It would make people feel a lot better and save the society great amounts of money.

The doctors name a number of factors that contribute to the state of the individual's health, a positive or negative view on life, worrying, diet, amount of exercise, the environment, family or social relations, traumas and more but the main thing is that these things are connected and work together. Therefore they must be treated side by side and no part left behind. This view is the core of a holistic view on health.

Medicine and CAM

CAM therapies are a part of the official and unofficial health system in Iceland and the doctors have different opinions of them. Many CAM therapies have a holistic connection or are built upon a holistic ideology, which makes them of special concern to the doctors.

Jóhanna emphasizes that we can use all kinds of means to help us live a healthy life and CAM treatments can be very helpful as preventive measures. In her opinion drugs and surgery should be used as a plan B if all other means fail. Daníel says its fine with him that his patients are getting CAM treatments or seeing mediums. If it helps them then it is all right as long as they are not being taken advantage of or it is interrupting his treatment. He talks with his patients about the CAM therapies they are using and gives them advice on them. He wants his patients to be able to talk about these things and he says they feel free to talk about their CAM treatments. In dealing with body/mind medicine and CAM therapies Haukur warns of the danger of quackery. Since the subject is very "open" and has not been studied enough there is room for rotten apples. To him it is important that people can prove themselves to be qualified in their field although it can be hard to test these things.

Júlía's patients sometimes ask her about herbs, natural medicine and CAM therapies. She tries to look up information regarding their questions and give them advice but feels she needs more education to be of more help. Her opinion is that if people feel better using CAM service then that means it is working. She also advises her patients to try relaxation and meditation. She says she would like to be able to recommend her patients to see someone with a different kind of knowledge of the body but she feels she does not know enough about it to do it. Another reason is that it costs more because it is not a part of the official health care system. Júlía says the reason she began interacting with CAM practitioners was that she felt she could not say that she had no prejudice against CAM unless she understood it better. It is her impression that there is a lot of prejudice from both sides and prejudice is ignorance. It is her opinion that health professionals and CAM practitioners cannot afford to be prejudiced regarding each other and should focus on combining their forces. After all both sides have the same goal of making people feel better.

Pétur is interested in various CAM therapies with various ideologies because to him it is important to be able to use all possibilities available and work towards the same goal. People should be able to receive the information they need and choose for themselves what treatment they want to use. He wants "alternative" and "conventional" therapies to be studied so they can be used together. He wants everybody who is working in this area to work together with the purpose of studying scientifically and professionally the effects various treatments have on health so that we can know what works and what does not work. Standards should be the same for "alternative" and "conventional" therapies. Pétur wants people who work with health from all fields to unite to prove that various therapies do work because it would make a whole lot of people feel better. He wants to fight for the use of natural ways to harness the body and save the society

a whole lot of money at the same time. He wants to break down the walls of prejudice and narrow-mindedness and find out what treatments work.

Jóhanna says she is open to working with CAM therapies and mix together with official treatments and in that way work from what suits the individual. She wants people to be well educated no matter what their field is. It is fine that you are an herbalist or massage therapist as long as you are well educated. It is not enough to take a short seminar and be real good at promoting yourself if you don't have much to base your work on. Professionalism must be required in all areas. Jóhanna wants to look at health from a holistic point of view and use all alternatives that can be validated by scientific measures. She knows a lot of professional health personnel that have also learned various CAM techniques/therapies.

Júlía has interacted with CAM therapists and is interested in their approach to health and thinks that some of them are better equipped to read the body and understand the reasons why people come to them. Many CAM therapists are better at meeting people where they are in their state of health and illness and advising them than official health professionals. To her there are positive and negative sides to the official health care system as well as the unofficial one. Eiríkur agrees with Júlía about the benefits of many CAM approaches and that CAM practitioners are returning people in better condition than they were before. To him the other side of curing or helping people is to make them feel better. Official medicine treats measurable symptoms and tries to make them go away but many unconventional therapies focus on making people feel better and that is hard to measure with conventional instruments. To Eiríkur this is an important factor regarding health and treatment of patients. To "measure" how patients feel when they leave his office is difficult and the only instrument he has is his intuitive.

CAM therapies cause mixed feelings among the doctors. They want to be open to other alternatives but at the same time they feel they have to protect their patients from abuse and keep their best interests at heart. All in all they have nothing against CAM therapies as long as they have been studied and measured and are done by professionals who are fully educated in their special field.

Discussion

The view on the body and the mind has gone through various changes in human history. Still today it is debated and revised and the doctors in the study say that another shift in thought is happening. Whether it is because of recent discoveries in the study of the brain, results that show psychosomatic origin of physical symptoms or the doctors own experience with their patients, they are suggesting that modern medicine needs to look at other areas that also affect human wellbeing. They emphasize the need for this holistic approach, to tackle health from all angles in order to cure disease, illness and maintain good health. The doctors are expanding their minds and their toolbox by researching alternative ways, not just to look at health but also to treat it. They are considering different ideas than they are brought up using and believing but demanding professionalism and scientific standards in all areas concerning health. Hoping to bridge a gap between what can seem like ill-fitting ideologies they believe that after all both sides have the same goal of making people feel better.

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