

CORNERSTONES OF NATUROPATHIC MEDICINE II: *PRIMUM NON NOCERE*

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INTRODUCTION

Yesterday I was on the phone with a young colleague. She had questions about how to manage a case. She was perplexed. How does one know what really works? How does one really know what to do? This question faced me two decades ago when I was just beginning practice. It is also the most fundamental question that the physician has faced since the beginning, and has been asked for several thousand years. What is reliable in medicine? This is the story of how I learned the answer to this question.

A JOURNEY TO NATUROPATHIC MEDICINE

In 1981, I was preparing to re-enter medical school, this time in pursuit of a medical doctor (MD) degree. I did not want to be an MD, but I did want more potent tools to be able to follow my patients into the hospital if necessary, to prescribe intravenous vitamins, and to be a better naturopathic doctor. The model of practice I learned at National College of Naturopathic Medicine was to diagnose and treat disease—the medical model—but using less harmful, natural medicines. I had become frustrated from not knowing how to reliably treat people who were seriously ill. I believed medical school would provide better training and more reliable tools.

It was at this time that I met Dr. Harold Dick, a naturopathic physician from Spokane, WA. Dr. Dick was elderly and did not look impressive, yet he spoke with confidence and conviction, maintaining that the treatment of seriously ill people was not difficult. I sent him the next serious case which came my way—a man with

terminal nephritis—and watched Dr. Dick turn the case around much to amazement of the patient's physicians. Dr. Dick's methods were diet, a few herbs, and hydrotherapy.

Dr. Dick told me that most of what I was doing was suppression, not cure—even with the vitamins I was using. As I struggled for over a year to understand, I continued to observe Dr. Dick, traveling to his clinic as often as I could from my home in Oregon. Slowly, as I watched and tried to imitate him, I began to understand what he was doing. There was an order to it.

LEARNING TO TRUST THE WISDOM OF THE BODY

During this same period, I was teaching medical history and reading medical literature from the time of the ancient Egyptians through the history of American medicine, looking for the origins of medical thought pertinent to our profession. One of the most significant findings I made was in volume one of Harris Coulter's *Divided Legacy*. In this text Coulter writes in great detail about the theories and practices that formed the Hippocratic healing methods circa 2,400 BCE. The basic premise was that "raw" elements occur in the patient. The body responds with "coction," a process akin to cooking, in which the elements are transformed then eliminated from the body during a crisis period resulting in the restoration of health.

From this reference I went to the Hippocratic corpus and in the treatise "On ancient medicine," I found the same basic process described. Hippocrates spoke of the dietary origins of illness and one of his key concepts regarded fever as a healing mechanism. If this were true,

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then evidence that fever is driven by an intrinsic wisdom, rather than an exogenous pyrogenic process, should exist. To find out, I referenced standard medical texts. Most fever is a controlled response to tissue injury or irritation, stimulated by intrinsic chemicals released by stressed cells and serves a purpose in the healing process. I looked for other writings in the historical literature about fever, including Galen, traditional Chinese medicine, Avicenna's *Canon of Medicine* (the fundamental piece of Arabic medical literature), and Sydenham's 17th century treatise *On Fever*.

I do not want to imply by this that I am a scholar. Rather, I was on a mission of discovery. I needed to know for my own understanding as well as the credibility of my teaching. More particularly, I wanted to understand how to approach an ill person who comes into my clinic. What do I tell the parent who is concerned about the child with a fever? Dr. Dick would be deeply disturbed if patients used aspirin in the treatment of fever, even throwing some of them out of his clinic if they did. If this is a problem with aspirin, what about *Salix spp* (willow) bark or extracts of it? What is wrong with this method of treatment?

What I learned, not only from my reading but more dramatically from watching the old doctor cure people with "incurable" diseases, was that I could trust the wisdom of the body. This was the only way I had ever encountered that presented a reliable, comprehensive approach to difficult illness with some assurance of success.

SUPPRESSION AND THE HEALING REACTION

Symptoms are an expression of the wisdom of the body. According to Dr. Dick, suppression of symptoms interferes with the process of healing and harms the body. It violates what the body is trying to do to heal itself. I was convinced that he was correct. But what about vitamins—how could they possibly be suppressive? Vitamins are nutritional elements necessary for life.

I came to the conclusion that anything given to relieve symptoms without removing the cause is suppressive. It does not change the underlying disturbance. Vitamins are given like a benign drug, which, if withdrawn, may not leave the per-

son in a state of permanently improved health. In truth, I still wrestle with this question somewhat. Vitamins may repair a biochemical lesion, or drive a process by mass action, but they do not bring about the transformation from illness to health.

What I do not wrestle with is the question of fever suppression. When treating a patient with chronic or degenerative disease, I expect a healing reaction. As the disturbing factors are ameliorated and the *vis medicatrix naturae* is stimulated, I expect to see the patient improve. As they continue to improve, a point in their healing process is reached where the body generates an acute healing reaction or "healing crisis." This may be characterized by fever as well as other symptoms. I expect this and school my patients to expect it. The healing reaction is generated through the diligent actions of both the doctor and the patient. In a supposedly terminal case, if the healing fever is suppressed with drugs, the patient may reverse and become terminal again. In severe chronic disease, the patient thus suppressed could become incurable. This requires a real trust in the process of healing and the wisdom of the *vis medicatrix naturae*.

A man came to see me about ten years ago with five lung tumors that had metastasized from primary kidney cancer. He had been given a month to live by his oncologist. One month after I began working with him, he was doing better and for eight months continued to improve. Three of the tumors disappeared and the other two reduced to 10% original size. This was accomplished by dietary changes, hydrotherapy, and homeopathy. He then developed a fever and his medical doctors insisted he go into the hospital.

Against my medical advice, he was admitted to the hospital, treated as if he had an infection, and given medicines to reduce the fever. When I saw him a day or two later, he looked as if he had aged ten years. I called Dr. Dick and asked for advice. He told me there was nothing to do—the man would die in about three months. The fever was a healing reaction produced by eight months of hydrotherapy, detoxification, and dedication. The body had generated the fever, returning the disturbance from a chronic suppressed state to an acute, activated

state. The body was in full response, and then it was suppressed. The patient continued to deteriorate despite my best efforts and died four months later.

PRIMUM NON NOCERE: THE HORSE AND THE STONES

The purpose of our philosophy is to instruct our practice, to be our reliable guide in the pursuit of each patient's healing. In standard medicine, reliability is considered to be based upon scientific experimentation and the statistical analysis of controlled studies. In naturopathic medicine we increasingly utilize controlled studies to evaluate our medicine, particularly outcomes studies. But we also rely upon the observation of the healing process that has accrued over millennia. As a result, we have a set of guidelines, a clinical philosophy based upon these observations, to instruct us. Our third defining principle, *primum non nocere*, helps encapsulate these therapeutic instructions:

Naturopathic physicians follow three precepts to avoid harming the patient.

1. Naturopathic physicians utilize methods and medicinal substances which minimize the risk of harmful effects, and apply the least possible force or intervention necessary to diagnose illness and restore health;
2. Whenever possible, the suppression of symptoms is avoided, as suppression generally interferes with the healing process;
3. Naturopathic physicians respect and work with the *vis medicatrix naturae* in diagnosis, treatment and counseling, for if this self-healing process is not respected the patient may be harmed.

This is a direct quote from the definition of naturopathic medicine as explicated by the American Association of Naturopathic Physicians.

Many of us understand the value of our medicine lies in its gentleness. We use less harmful substances and approaches, and therein lies our value. Some even define naturopathic medicine as the rational prescription of natural products based upon research analysis of efficacy. These concepts are contained within naturopathic medicine, but are only a small part of it.

Avoidance of suppression is much more important.

One of the most difficult aspects of naturopathic philosophy regards suppression: "Suppression interferes with the healing process." If this is true, then it places naturopathic medicine at odds with standard medicine, perhaps more than any other aspect of our philosophy.

Consider this analogy. A tired old horse is hitched to a wagon filled with stones. It is very difficult to get the horse to start pulling, but by lightening the load a bit by removing some stones (dietary changes), coaxing and whipping it (hydrotherapy, homeopathy, acupuncture), slowly but surely it begins to pull the wagon. With the inertia overcome and now working with the horse, it can get the wagon moving at a reasonable clip. The horse starts to feel better until it approaches a hill (the healing reaction, a fever). The destination is just over the hill, but the horse really needs coaxing to climb the hill pulling all those stones. It slows down but keeps moving up the hill. Half way up, the legs are knocked out from under the horse (suppression), causing it to stumble and fall. There is no way the horse can get up on that slope and begin to pull the wagon again.

The analogy is not perfect but the problem with suppression is made apparent in it. You have activated all the healing power the person had to get to the point of healing cancer or other chronic degeneration. In the middle of the final and most intense effort it can generate, having become stronger over several months, it is poisoned. That is it—there is no more potential to heal that body in almost all cases. It can do no more.

It is in understanding the process of healing and respecting the *vis medicatrix naturae* that we work with our patients and see the amazing recuperative potential of the body. We see the awesome healing process occur as presumably incurable diseases are reversed. In doing this we fulfill the dictum *primum non nocere*. Naturopathic physicians choose therapies that have the least potential for suppression or harm, and apply them in the order best utilized by the body in its healing process. This requires an understanding of the healing process (see "The process of healing," *Journal of Naturopathic Medicine*, vol 7, #1). It was this order that I finally perceived in Dr. Dick's work and was

key to my understanding of naturopathic medicine. And it is the key to my answer to my young colleague's question, "How do we know what to do?"

THE THERAPEUTIC ORDER

There is an order to the process of healing, referred to in naturopathic medicine as the therapeutic order or the hierarchy of therapeutics. The order is determined by how the body heals. It has six steps:

1. Identify and remove disturbing factors, particularly in the diet.
2. Establish a more health-generating regimen.
3. Stimulate the vital force.
4. Support those systems that require it.
5. Correct structural disturbance.
6. Treat pathology.

Healing occurs when the conditions for healing exist. So the first order of therapy is to create the conditions which allow for healing and recovery. This occurs in two parts. The first part is to understand what is disturbing the health, and remove or ameliorate it. The second part is to establish a healthy regimen. To do this, one must understand that which disturbs health. Unhealthy diet is the primary disturbance and stress a close second. But any of us could construct a comprehensive list of disturbing factors. Certainly there are genetic and prenatal factors, which we need to understand but can not alter. The presence of disease, such as diabetes, disturbs health. Medications, exposures of various types, including toxic chemical and microbial exposures, immunizations, traumas, including physical and emotional, previous surgical interventions, and relationships with other people, especially significant others, are other disturbing factors. In short, all the things that impact our lives may be a source of disturbance to the body economy. These must be evaluated for each patient, and recommendations for modification given. This often includes non-specific detoxification. In general, however, the principal modification that most people need is in the diet and digestion.

Once disturbing factors have begun to be rectified, one will begin to see amelioration of symptoms. Stimulation of the vital force will overcome the inertia of illness, and more rapidly propel the person toward normal function, helping to remove the residues of disturbance

in the body. This is most directly done through hydrotherapy, homeopathy, acupuncture, and exercise.

If organs or tissues have been sufficiently weakened or damaged, they will need to be supported. This is done using tonifying botanicals, specific nutrients, physiotherapy, and other therapies directed at organ and tissue function. Structure may need to be corrected using manipulations, exercise, and related therapies. The key to fundamental improvement is the application of these therapies in the appropriate order. If one stimulates prior to removal of disturbing factors, one will get more reactions by the body or further weaken the system. If one provides specific organ nutrition without removing the cause of disturbed function, improvement will be half-hearted and temporary.

The therapeutic order becomes more obvious when one understands the process of healing. Health is disrupted by disturbing factors → disruption of function → symptoms of the body's reaction (fever, inflammation, etc.) → discharge → resolution. In chronic illness, the disturbing factors are being constantly encountered (harmful diet, etc.) or the healing processes are continuously impeded (suppressive treatment), so that no resolution may occur. When we understand this process, the therapeutic order becomes obvious: identify and remove disturbing factors (modify diet and stress, etc.), stimulate the self healing mechanisms (hydrotherapy, homeopathy, acupuncture), support function (botanicals, nutritional specifics, etc.), and do not suppress the reaction or the discharge.

By this understanding, if medicinal substances are applied prior to removing disturbing causes, permanent improvement should not be expected. Additionally, one should begin therapeutic intervention with treatments that have the least potential for suppression or biochemical interference.

CONCLUSION

Primum non nocere is a rich set of instructions that dictate to us a therapeutic order as well as our therapeutic modalities. Our therapies are chosen not on the basis of being natural. Our therapeutic choices are the direct result of our understanding of how the body heals and are applied to support the

order of the that healing process. We choose to intervene with therapies that support the *vis medicatrix naturae* rather than suppress it, to intervene as little as possible, and to intervene with the least force and intervention required to effect cure. Cure is understood to be a restoration of health upon clear and simple principles, derived from the observation of nature and the healing process, efficiently, effectively, and with the least harm to the person. That is what the naturopathic physician understands by *primum non nocere*.

Now I can tell my young colleague how to proceed. First, evaluate the diet and digestion. Look for primary factors that are disturbing the health of your patient and recommend modifications. Then begin to stimulate the healing process using those therapies that do not add a new burden to the system. Identify which systems of the body require special attention and apply the rich array of botanicals and nutrients we have available to support and restore these systems, in the absence of ongoing disturbance. Expect rapid and profound healing. Be aware of the possibility of a healing reaction. Respect fever. If still necessary, which is rare, focus upon the pathology, but only after preparing the body for healing.

Our clinical theory instructs us in how to proceed. If a case seems too complicated, go back to the basics. Simplify the diet and focus upon digestion. Stimulate the healing potential with hydrotherapy. Trust the *vis medicatrix naturae*, and expect success.

BIOGRAPHY

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