Allopathic Medicine vs. Holistic Medicine

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The two terms allopathic medicine and holistic medicine are becoming more relevant when it comes to making proper health care decision nowadays. One might ask: what does "allopathic" medicine mean, and when should I resort to its practitioners? And is choosing "holistic" practitioners to treat all my ailments a good approach? An obvious answer is to use both these systems to care for yourself and your family. But how should you decide when to choose what approach? I would like to offer brief descriptions about each approach and their relevancy regarding our day-to-day health.

Definitions

Allopathic medicine refers to the practice of conventional medicine that uses pharmacologically active agents or physical interventions (like surgery) to treat or suppress symptoms or pathophysiologic processes of disease.

Holistic medicine represents the idea that all the properties of a given system (physical, biological, social, etc.) cannot be truly determined or explained by its component parts alone. Instead, the system as a whole determines how the parts function together.

Relevancy

Reading these cut and dry definitions makes it sound like the holistic approach is a much more comprehensive look at the whole system, especially when it comes to treating a person (who is a biological and organic system).

The allopathic approach is mostly focused on the presented signs and symptoms, and it treats the manifestations of what might be a deeper and more chronic condition. A good example of this conclusion is when a patient visits most conventional clinics around the country with a headache. They will check her vital signs, ask some questions, and will send her home with some pain medication as a form of treatment. If she returns later with the same complaint, they will probably order some basic blood work, or they might
even order a CAT scan of her head to rule out a brain tumor; ultimately they will send her home with more or stronger pain meds. If she returns again with the same complaint, they will then refer her to a brain specialist or a pain clinic, where she might receive more pain related medicines or therapies.

The main point of referring to this common condition as an example of standard care in most conventional (allopathic) clinics is to demonstrate the philosophy of standard care and the main focus of this type of approach. Patient presents with a headache, let’s then focus on stopping, or at least, reducing her pain from the headache. It is actually a very compassionate approach since the main focus really comes from comforting the patients and reducing their pain as soon as possible. And I am sure those of us who have experienced nasty headaches from time to time can appreciate this approach, regardless of its possible long-term consequences. It is very effective and beneficial when addressing most acute and urgent care situations, since the main focus should be the immediate complaint. For example, if you are involved in a severe car accident, you do want to be treated in a well equipped and modern Western facility to properly address your "immediate" concerns (broken bones, blood loss, etc). However, it might be more beneficial in the long run to follow-up with your holistic doctor after you are released from the care of your Western doctors to address some of the issues caused by the accident, rather than just to keep taking your pain medication.

In this country, one confusion that most people have about these two main approaches is that every conventional medical provider practices allopathic care, while every natural medical practitioner practices holistic medicine. Although this assumption might be true in most cases, it is not always.

The same lady with a headache could have visited a naturopath, a chiropractor, or an acupuncturist who would have primarily focused on comforting her headache without considering possible underlining causes. Or she could have visited a conventional clinic with unique staff who may have looked into her headache deeper and tried to consider other (not so obvious) causes.

The point is that although it would be uncommon for a natural medical provider (especially a naturopath) to practice allopathic medicine, it is very possible and sometimes actually easier to do that, rather than addressing the whole person. Not every patient is ready or willing to take on a holistic approach since it usually means experiencing symptoms longer and using more complicated treatments in which they will need to actively participate.
When it comes time to make decisions about your care, the most important person is you! You need to educate yourself to be empowered with relevant information when making these important decisions. You can’t just assume that every natural medicine practitioner is a holistic doctor, or if you need to have an holistic approach when dealing with every medical situation.

A smart patient will take his/her time researching the practitioners in the area from different modalities and utilize them appropriately. The more involved you are in making medical decisions about your care, the more predictable the outcome will be. Just keep in mind that every practitioner from all different modalities can play an important and active role in your care, as long as you approach them at the right time and for relevant reasons.