

## **INTEGRATIVE MEDICINE**

### **Key Leverage Points for Improving our Health Care System**

#### *Small Changes with Big Results*

One of the biggest challenges facing America today is our faltering healthcare system. Effective strategies for improving it start with understanding the key leverage points where small, manageable change will create ripple effects that influence the larger system in substantial and beneficial ways.

Integrative Medicine is the practice of medicine that reaffirms the importance of the relationship between practitioner and patient and focuses on the whole person. Integrative medicine is informed by evidence, and makes use of all appropriate therapeutic approaches, healthcare professionals and disciplines to achieve optimal health and healing. While the integrative approach offers immense promise throughout all of medicine, there are four areas in which utilization of integrative strategies could begin to save millions of health care dollars and improve millions of lives. These are:

- Managing Stress
- Living With Chronic Disease
- Pain Management
- Prevention and Wellness

#### *The Underlying Science*

The mind and body are in a constant state of interaction. In fact, it is so fundamental that we often take it for granted. (We decide to stand up and we stand up, we feel grief and our eyes tear, we become anxious and develop a stomachache.) Because the connection can be a powerful ally or a formidable enemy, for the past twenty-five years, the National Institutes of Health and other governmental and institutional agencies have funded scientific research to study how a person's emotional, mental, social, spiritual, and behavioral factors affect his or her health.

Targeted research has shown that psychological factors play a substantive role in the development and progression of coronary artery disease and that mind-body interventions can be an effective adjunct in the management of arthritis and pain. Evidence suggests that mind-body interventions can improve mood, quality of life, and coping abilities for cancer patients, as well as ameliorate symptoms, such as chemotherapy-induced nausea,

vomiting, and pain. There is also considerable evidence that emotional traits, both negative and positive, influence people's susceptibility to infection and that negative mood or stress is associated with slow wound healing.

No matter what medical intervention is used, understanding how individual people can affect their own disease progression or their own healing processes and helping patients to help themselves enables physicians and other healthcare providers to deliver more effective care.

### *Managing Stress*

According to recent research, 43% of all adults suffer adverse health effects from stress and 75% to 90% of all doctor's office visits are for stress-related ailments and complaints. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) declared stress a hazard of the workplace, costing American industry more than \$300 billion annually.

Stress can contribute to health problems such as headaches, chronic pain, high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes, skin conditions, asthma, and arthritis in addition to depression and anxiety.

Medical research has shown that integrative strategies — such as Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction, guided imagery and biofeedback — can significantly reduce stress, mitigate physical and psychological symptoms, reduce pain levels, and promote health and wellness. These interventions, which fall under the rubric of mind-body medicine, are all processes that once learned, patients can do for themselves.

### *Living With Chronic Disease*

The Center for Disease Control (CDC) has stated that, “Chronic diseases—such as heart disease, cancer, and diabetes—are the leading causes of death and disability in the United States. Chronic diseases account for 70% of all deaths in the U.S., which is 1.7 million each year. These diseases also cause major limitations in daily living for almost 1 out of 10 Americans or about 25 million people.”

Although chronic diseases are among the most common and costly health problems, they are also among the most preventable. The CDC also states that, “Adopting healthy behaviors such as eating nutritious foods, being physically active, and avoiding tobacco use can prevent or control the devastating effects of these diseases.”

The 2007 Institute of Medicine Report on Cancer Care also focuses on the importance of addressing behavioral issues. This report states that, “Cancer care today often provides state-of-the-science biomedical treatment, but fails to address the psychological and social (psychosocial) problems associated with the illness. This failure can compromise

the effectiveness of health care and thereby adversely affect the health of cancer patients.”

Integrative medicine has developed powerful interventional programs that can actually reverse some forms of heart disease and mitigate the disease process for other chronic conditions, without drugs or surgery. These comprehensive lifestyle change programs teach people how to effectively reduce stress; how to eat in a way that nourishes the body, using food as medicine; how to get the right amount and kind of physical exercise; and how to increase one’s network of social support. The most recent research suggests that the reason these types of lifestyle change programs may work so well is because the combined interventions ‘turn on’ the beneficial parts of the genome and ‘turn off’ the more harmful parts.

### *Pain Management*

Pain is responsible for nearly 40 million visits to health care providers each year. It costs the United States more than \$100 billion annually in health care expenditures and lost productivity. It can prolong hospital stays and impede recovery, and in some cases is life-threatening. According to the American Pain Foundation, more than 50 million Americans experience chronic pain, with back pain, headache, and joint pain being the most common

Pain is a complex health issue. It can be caused by inflammation, by problems with the musculoskeletal system, by chemical imbalances in the tissues, or by anatomical imbalances. In addition, a person’s mental and emotional state can exasperate or mitigate the perception of pain.

Research demonstrates that integrative medicine pain programs reduce and sometimes even completely eliminate pain by using a multidisciplinary approach that includes the use of mind-body medicine to reduce stress and enhance quality of life, and the use of psychological interventions that address the patient’s emotions, behavior and attitudes, shifting negative aspects to more positive ones. According to an NIH consensus conference, “A number of well-defined behavioral and relaxation interventions now exist and are effective in the treatment of chronic pain.”

Integrative approaches also include the use of nutrition as a means of mitigating inflammation and enhancing immune function; interventions that improve the ability to function physically such as massage and exercise; and proven non-pharmaceutical pain reduction therapies such as acupuncture. Throughout the integrative process, patients are empowered to actively participate in their own pain control strategies.

## *Prevention and Wellness*

According to the recently released Milken Institute report, *An Unhealthy America: The Economic Burden of Chronic Disease*, more than half of Americans suffer from one or more chronic diseases. “Each year millions of people are diagnosed with chronic disease, and millions more die from their condition.” By the report’s calculations, “the most common chronic diseases are costing the economy more than \$1 trillion annually —and that figure threatens to reach \$6 trillion by the middle of the century. Yet much of this cost is avoidable.”

The study states that seven of the most common chronic diseases — cancer, diabetes, hypertension, stroke, heart disease, pulmonary conditions, and mental disorders — have been linked to behavioral and/or environmental risk factors that broad-based prevention programs could address.

Helping patients develop healthy lifestyle habits that will keep them well is a large part of integrative medicine’s focus. These strategies include eating nutritionally sound food, adopting healthy habits (non-smoking, etc.), building healthy relationships, living and working in non-toxic environments, being purposefully engaged in life, practicing stress reduction, and staying fit through exercise, among others. Many integrative medicine centers employ health coaches who work with patients to develop individualized health plans, a strategy that research shows improves health outcomes.

## *Recent Evidence for the Efficacy of Integrative Medicine*

Recent research and pilot projects reveal the effectiveness of integrative medicine. Some examples are:

- In an integrative care pilot project at Chrysler run by Teresa Bartlett, MD, that employed mind-body and nutritional strategies to address back pain, participants had significantly fewer ER visits than the control group, with some patients achieving complete recovery.
- In a 2005 study involving prostate cancer patients run by Dean Ornish, MD, volunteers declined radiation, chemo and surgery and participated in a lifestyle modification program, which included a strictly plant-based diet along with other healthy behaviors. At the end of six months, diagnostic tests for cancer activity showed the vegan group’s cancer markers had actually decreased.
- An 2008 investigation to evaluate the effect and feasibility of a mindfulness based stress reduction (MBSR) program on immune function, quality of life (QOL), and coping in women recently diagnosed with breast cancer provided evidence for the beneficial effects of MBSR all three measured areas — immune function, QOL, and coping.