

MIND AND SPIRIT KEYS TO HEALTH PHYSICIAN'S ROLE IS TO HELP PREVENT ILLNESS

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Traditional Chinese physicians diagnose not by using reflex hammers, blood pressure cuffs or CAT scans but by looking, listening, smelling and touching. They examine the tongue, feel for three pulses in each wrist and ask many questions.

David Eisenberg, a research fellow at the Harvard Medical School, used many of the same patient, probing methods over the last decade studying traditional Chinese medicine. The result, told in a recently published book about his year as the first American medical exchange student in China, is a freshet of insights into the Chinese philosophy of health and medicine. It is also an effort to examine them skeptically in light of Western medical methodologies and values.

Eisenberg, an internist and fellow in behavioral medicine at Beth Israel Hospital, didn't abandon his Western medical background in empirical verification during his year in Peking and subsequent visits. But he kept an open mind as he studied the preventative, teaching role of the traditional Chinese physician. He also witnessed some startling examples of the healing power.

Of particular interest to Eisenberg is the concept **Qi** (pronounced "chee"), or vital energy, one of the cornerstones of traditional Oriental medicine. From it flows another tenet: that health is affected by behavior, thought and emotions as much as by such physiological factors as exposure to pathogens.

Qi is believed to flow through specific channels in the body. By manipulating those channels through **acupuncture**, acupressure massage and herbal remedies, and by instructing patients in ways to live balanced lives, traditional Chinese doctors have for thousands of years controlled certain chronic-pain syndromes and successfully treated a range of ills from migraine headaches to heart disease to urinary tract infections.

Eisenberg argues that "there is a science to be teased out of the debris of case reports and folk testimonials." He's backed that up by initiating interest in controlled studies of traditional Chinese medicine. He and six other US doctors are now in China working with a group of prominent Chinese doctors.

Whatever the outcome of that venture, Eisenberg is convinced that Western doctors, for all their advanced technology, may learn something from their traditional counterparts in the East.

"Two powerful tenets came through loud and clear," the 30-year-old Brooklyn native said in an interview before returning to China. "One was this notion that mind and spirit, as well as lifestyle, play a key role in maintaining and protecting health. The other was that the physicians' role was to **help** prevent illness, that prevention was always superior to intervention."

US medical education, he argues, could do more to focus on the doctor-patient relationship. "If you bombard a medical student with science and technology and limit the amount of time spent listening to patients - learning to really listen and connect, emotionally and psychologically with patients - you end up with a masterful technician not addressing emotional needs."

That **Qi** cannot, as yet, be documented on an oscilloscope scan in a predictable, controlled manner has not dissuaded Eisenberg from attempting to correlate it to the growing Western interest in the mind-body link. "Three thousand years before the birth of the first psycho-neuroimmunologist," he writes in his book, "Encounters With **Qi**, Exploring Chinese Medicine," "Chinese doctors were struggling with the same mind-body relations."

The differences between traditional Chinese and Western medicine, he writes, have to do with the ways diseases are perceived, diagnosed and treated. Essential to the Eastern model of health and illness are the roles psyche and lifestyle play.

"The traditional Chinese physician's role is really that of teacher, sort of in the rabbinical mode of one who guides by example. The physician is one who instructs patients on how best to maximize genetic-given components and their

choices of lifestyle to live the fullest life possible, emotionally and physically. I like the idea in that light. It's idealist. It's even naive in a certain ways, but it's a notion I carried with me through medical school and I still believe in it."

It is also, he notes, a philosophy "far afield from the Western notion of fixing, of seeing the body as a conglomerate of parts that run down or break or need to be retuned."

Eisenberg said he is "inclined to believe" that **Qi** is a physical entity; he also believes that the practice of China's oldest martial art, **Qi Gong**, elicits biochemical changes that promote healing and bolster the immune system. His hope is that, through future collaborative investigation, medical science may yet isolate the agents of that bodily change.

Eisenberg has not shed skepticism altogether. He readily concedes that such prescriptions as antelope-horn tea may succeed because the patient believes they will.

"Man's fascination with the magical makes him want to believe that such things are true. This is the mesmer phenomenon in Oriental culture. One **can** argue that they want to believe, and having built a system around **Qi** are loath to give it up."

On the other hand, having witnessed some remarkable recoveries achieved through **acupuncture** manipulation of **Qi** - including that of a factory worker abruptly stricken by intense pain in her legs and a loss of muscular control - Eisenberg is not prepared to dismiss it as merely a fanciful placebo effect.

"There's a lot of tantalizing evidence that **Qi** is more than a mental construct and that the **acupuncture** meridians in fact exist, although they don't correspond to anatomical tracts as we know them in the West."

The ancient practice of **acupuncture**, which in the last two decades has been increasingly used both in China and in the West as a form of anesthesia, rests on the notion the body has certain channels of **Qi** that **can** be manipulated. One intriguing fact, Eisenberg said, is that about one out of 1000 people respond to **acupuncture** stimulation "by having sensations propagate along their body that outline the acupuncture channels as they've been known for 3000 years."

"Something like that **can't** be explained easily by Western anatomy or physiology," Eisenberg said, "but it's a phenomenon just the same."

When Eisenberg lived in China in 1979-80, **Qi Gong**, which means "breathing skill," was enjoying a popular renaissance. Its students master certain circular bodily movements and gain heightened control over their diaphragm, chest wall, throat, tongue and nasal passages as they practice rigorous, rhythmic breathing skills.

At its heart - and at the heart of all traditional Chinese medicine - is the notion of **Qi** as the pulse that drives the human metabolism and all physical functions.

"**Qi**," Eisenberg writes, quoting a doctor-teacher at the Beijing Institute of Traditional Medicine, "means that which differentiates life from death, animate from inanimate. To live is to have **Qi** in every part of your body. To die is to be a body without **Qi**. For health to be maintained, there must be a balance of **Qi**, neither too much nor too little."

Qi, Chinese traditionalists believe, has three origins: one's parents, the food one eats and the air one breathes. The first is depleted little by little; the latter are constantly being used and replenished. **Qi** is thought to flow through conduits connecting all parts of the body. Pain - in the shoulder or back, for example - may be the result of an imbalance or blockage of **Qi**. In **acupuncture**, doctors adjust the flow of **Qi** by inserting needles into these conduits. Acupressure massage follows a similar principle.

"All of human pathology **can** be seen in terms of balances and imbalances," Eisenberg's teacher continues. "A balanced state corresponds to health. Any excess or deficiency corresponds to illness. When the body is in a state of equilibrium, internally and with respect to the external environment, then it possesses a 'positive vitality' " that **can help** repel disease.

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