

“Many ‘challenging cases’ have their starting place in three basic functions of the body: metabolism, immune system, and detoxification.”

By JoAnne Pizzino, MD, MPH

At Whole Health Solutions, we have been treating “challenging cases” and “mystery illnesses” by getting to the *root cause* for nearly two decades.

One of the reasons certain conditions seem so daunting is that the fundamental approach to the patient differs widely among diverse healing specialties. Allopathic medicine, or what we think of as “standard” health care in Western societies tends to focus on *effects* of disease. This is similar to trying to put Grandma’s vase back together again after it has hit the floor and shattered.

It may be the cause of the shattering is really a game of fetch played with Fido indoors. Or, on closer examination, is this because Johnny was avoiding doing his homework because of his ADD? Such is the nature of truly getting to root *causes*.

While it may be life-saving to use a balloon or stent or bypass to treat the effects of a clogged coronary artery, it does nothing to address the reason for the clog in the first place. One may say it had to do with high blood pressure or high cholesterol, but an integrative medicine physician would ask why those values are out of balance. Even when the answer is a genetically-based family trait, it is turning out that one must ask what *caused* those particular genes to be turned on in this individual patient. For instance, recent studies indicate that for some inherited conditions, only 12 percent can be attributed to genes, and 57 percent is determined by lifestyle factors.

Instead of just describing *what* went wrong with an allopathic diagnosis, the integrative medicine physician seeks to find out *why* and *how* a person ended up with a distinct condition.

VITAL QUESTIONS

It turns out that asking these questions often leads us to solving a whole list of complaints by getting down to underlying patterns that often overlap, creating symptoms in many areas. For instance, while a patient may come in for help with their joint pain, we might find that inflammatory triggers in their gastrointestinal tract, hidden systemic infections, or even environmental toxins, such as heavy metals or mold, are also creating headaches, bowel dysfunction, or allergies.

Instead of dividing the person up into organ systems, such as pulmonary or dermatologic, a root cause investigation looks at how the person’s systems act as a whole. What was out of equilibrium when the disorder was able to gain a foothold? Why is the body not able to make use of its elegant methods to get everything back into order? How



Dr. Pizzino

Getting to *the Root of Healing*

can we make the body less able to support dysfunction and better able to flourish harmoniously?

Looking for root causes often entails a very detailed health history. It can really help to know about childhood illnesses, work, or family stresses that were occurring at about the time the illness began, past or current hobbies, and more. I find that allowing the patient to tell his or her whole story, even hunches or intuition about what he/she thinks is going on, combined with the trained pattern-recognition of a health sleuth can lead us straight to the source.

BASIC FUNCTIONS

Many “challenging cases” have their starting place in three basic functions of the body: metabolism (which includes hormones and nutrition), immune system (inflammation from pathogens or environmental triggers), and detoxification (impaired ability to remove wastes and toxins.) Whether we are talking about heart disease, diabetes, cancer, autoimmune diseases, or more garden-variety issues such as fatigue, allergies, irritable bowel syndrome, or headaches, optimizing these three mechanisms often allows the body to heal itself, even in very serious diseases.

Evaluating the state of these functions usually requires sophisticated laboratory testing aimed at root causes rather than just end-stage disease (which is usually the only diagnosis found with most routine labs.) It also requires the health care provider to have an advanced understanding of what is actually being measured by a particular test. Patients often bring us labs done by other physicians which they were told were “normal” or “don’t need treatment,” yet on closer inspection are pointing to the very root cause we seek. Since most functions in the body are designed as

feedback-loop cycles, looking for broken links can help pinpoint the treatment that will help the whole body function cohesively again. A simple urine lab test called an Organic Acids Test can help us identify broken links in all three basic bodily functions.

FATIGUE

Let’s look at fatigue as an example of how important it is to use a root-cause approach. We know that simply giving someone a stimulant to treat the effect, such as amphetamines, can actually cause great harm. Some illnesses, such as congestive heart failure or autoimmune illnesses such as multiple sclerosis have fatigue as a feature of the disease, but does that mean you have to just “live with it” as long as the disease is not killing you?

Again, the root cause may lead us from inflammation to toxins to the mitochondrial power plant. Of course, we would start with sleep as everyone knows a poor night’s sleep impacts their energy the next day. Are dietary factors impacting hormones disrupting sleep? Is neurotransmitter production impaired by lack of nutrients or inflammation? Is the sympathetic nervous system stuck on an open throttle from lifestyle factors such as stress?

If you actually sleep many hours but are not refreshed, could hidden infections or toxins be accumulating wastes faster than the sleep cycle can remove them? If we just cover up the sleep with a sedative medication, we have not addressed the root cause, and even worse, many of these medications (such as zolpidem and alprazolam) have now been linked to increased risk for cancer or memory loss.

Restoring fundamental healing cycles in the body is often not as simple as covering up a symptom with a quick fix, yet it nearly always yields better quality of life. This can require the patient to take the time to listen to his or her body, and the health care provider to spend time openly listening to the patient, as well as giving detailed education so the person is empowered to generate his/her own healing.

It may also require persistence and partnership. The physician doggedly pursues root causes while the patient diligently follows through with all treatment. This winning team leads us to solving many tough cases of chronic fatigue, fibromyalgia, autoimmune diseases, allergies, headaches, insomnia, chronic infections, hormonal dysfunction, gastrointestinal complaints, and more. Don’t settle for being a “medical mystery.” Empower yourself to get to the root of healing. **h&h**

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