WHERE DOES IT HURT?

The New World of the Medical Humanities

Where does it hurt?

www.wellcomecollection.org/wheredoesithurt

Edited by
John Holden,
John Kieffer,
John Newbigin,
and Shelagh Wright

ISBN: 978-0-9570285-7-9/First published in October 2014
Design: Project/www.thisisproject.com
Illustration: Paul Davis/www.copyrightdavis.com
Print: Allander
Commissioned by: Wellcome Trust/www.wellcome.ac.uk
On boils, pestilence and a sow's purse
Christina Patterson
Writer, broadcaster and columnist

For quite a lot of my life, my body has been my enemy. As a teenager, for example, I thought I was too fat. I didn’t like the little red lumps that started appearing on my chin, and cheeks. I wanted to look like the girls on the cover of Jackie. They had glossy hair, and perfect teeth and skin like a peach.

When I hit 23, I found out what it was like to have a body that seemed to have started a full-blown war. First, there were the spots. These weren’t just teenage spots. These were deep red lumps which had doctors calling medical students in to stare. These, in fact, were the kind of spots that had you thinking of pestilence, and Job.

The spots were blasted off with ultra-violet light, in a cubicle that felt a bit like a coffin. After the light, there were drugs. For many, many years, there were drugs. There were antibiotics, and anti-androgens and contraceptive pills, and  anti-malarial and  anti-androgens and  contraceptive pills, and  anti-malarial and  contraceptive pills, and  anti-malarial and  contraceptive pills, and  antibiotics, and  antibiotics, and  antibiotics, and  antibiotics, and  antibiotics.

The hospital lost the blood tests. Hospitals, in my experience, are quite good at losing blood tests. When they were found, a year after they were taken, I was told I had an autoimmune disease called lupus. Lupus, they said, was incurable. It was quite likely to attack my kidneys, and my lungs.

I tried steroids, which didn’t work, and painkillers, which didn’t work, and anti-malarial tablets, which didn’t work, and steroid injections, which didn’t work, and homeopathy, which didn’t work, and Chinese herbs, which didn’t work, and acupuncture, which didn’t work, and special diets, which didn’t work, and being wired up to some kind of energy machine, which didn’t work and cost a bomb. I also had psychotherapy, which, in the end, did.

It took a few years for the pain to go, and a few years for it to come back. It has come back four or five times since. I usually think I’ve sprained an ankle. Sometimes, I limp to A & E. It takes time for me to realise that this is what I’ve always had, which sometimes shows up in blood tests and sometimes doesn’t. I always think the pain will never go, but in the end it always does. Last time I had it was nine years go. It started the day after the 7/7 bombs. That, by the way, was after I had breast cancer the first time, but before the cancer came back.

In spite of all of this, I don’t think my body’s my enemy now. I don’t think it helps to see your body as an enemy. I think it’s much, much better to see it as a friend. I wish, when I was younger, I’d known some of the things I know now. I wish, for example, that I’d known that when doctors talk about bodies and minds being linked, that isn’t something that should make you feel ashamed. It also doesn’t mean that you’ve made your symptoms up. What it means is that your body can sometimes say the things you can’t, and when it does, you should probably listen.

I’m all for medicine, of course. I’m all for blasting tumours with X-rays or very nasty drugs. I’m all for hacking out the bits that are trying to kill you, and trying to make a sow’s purse of what’s left. I’ve had six operations in the past 10 years, and, if it will keep me going, I’ll queue up for six more. There comes a point when only drugs and surgery will do.

But what applies to cancer doesn’t apply to everything else. The answer to disease isn’t always drugs. People get ill because they’re sad, or angry, or stressed. They get ill because they eat rubbish, drink too much and hardly ever move. They get ill, in fact, because they don’t treat their body as a friend. If you treated a friend in the way many of us treat our bodies, that friend would probably hate you, too.

Our National Health Service promises to look after us when things go wrong, but it doesn’t do all that much to help us make sure they don’t. It’s far too keen on hospitals. People still seem to think that the answer to sickness is hospitals. I think we should get rid of lots of hospitals, and have health workers working in the places where people live. Those health workers should show us how to eat well, and how to exercise, and how to relax when we’re stressed. (They should also look as if they do these things themselves. Far, far too many people working in the NHS don’t.) And when we’re sad, they should point us to a listening ear. A short burst of CBT costs a lot less than drugs for the rest of your life.

We need to get a grip. If we don’t want to bankrupt our NHS, we all need to get a grip. We need to get a grip on the kind of health system that will work better for most people, and we need to make more of an effort to stay well.

I have learnt, the hard way, that the best way to keep healthy is to be happy, and active, and curious, and to be grateful for the loan of this incredible machine we all live in, on the face of this incredible earth.
Where does it hurt?

www.wellcomecollection.org/wheredoesithurt

All work has been contributed under Creative Commons CC BY 4.0, for terms please see:
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

Wellcome Trust
Gibbs Building
215 Euston Road
London
NW1 2BE

T : +44(0)20 7611 8888
F : +44(0)20 7611 8545

The views expressed in this publication are not necessarily those of the Wellcome Trust