

Bringing Faith and Medicine Together

Dan Fountain served in church-based health programmes in the Congo for 35 years and is now teaching and consulting worldwide. This article is based on his address to the World Congress of the ICMDA in Durban in July 1998.

In the beginning, faith and healing were integrated. The priest was the healer and the temple or shrine was a place where healing could occur. In the Bible the Hebrew word 'yeshuwah' means both salvation and health. The Greek verb 'sozo' means to save, to heal, and to make whole.

In the early centuries after Christ, faith and healing began to move apart. As science developed, the spiritual aspect of life was gradually rejected. Science deals with that which is subject to physical measurements and experimentation. Medical science limits itself to what is physical, observable and replicable. In this process, our concept of the person has become fragmented. Diseases of the body are the concern of medicine, problems of the mind are the realm of psychology, and spiritual problems are relegated to pastors and priests. It is now our duty as Christian practitioners to bring faith in Christ and the practice of medicine back together as an integrated whole. To do this we must first recognise the wholeness of the person we seek to heal.

What does the Bible say about the wholeness of the person? Genesis 2:7 says that God took the dust of the ground and formed a person. He used natural elements to make arteries, veins, and blood cells; nerves, muscles, sense organs and all of our organ systems. However, marvellous as this creation was, it was not alive. The person did not become alive until God breathed into it the breath of life, his Spirit. So we are more than just a physical organism; we are a physical organism imbued with spirit.

Proverbs 14:30 says: 'A heart at peace gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones' (NIV). This profound insight makes it clear that peace of mind has positive physiological effects. It also declares that, just as cancer destroys the body, so does envy as well as a host of other negative or destructive emotions.

In medical science we find a growing body of scientific evidence that our thoughts, feelings and emotions have a controlling influence over many physiological processes. It has been shown how prolonged stress affects the production of the adreno-cortical hormones, which in turn affect the functioning of many of our organ systems.¹

Clinically we observe how an inadequate response to the physical, psychological and social stresses of life can cause physical pathology. Many so-called physical illnesses (eg essential hypertension, autoimmune disorders, chronic inflammatory syndromes, and even some malignancies), have a strong psychological component related to inadequately handled stress. Stress also affects the immune system by inhibiting resistance to infections and suppressing healing and recovery. Many articles in the medical literature show how faith, prayer and participation in religious activities have a positive effect on health and recovery from illness. So the Bible, medical science and clinical experience all confirm that we are persons whose body, mind, and spirit are integrated into a unified whole.

Jesus as Healer

Jesus was much more than a medical doctor curing diseases. Yes, he cured leprosy, but he did much more than that; he healed persons who had leprosy. He healed the whole person because he knew that when someone was ill, every part of him was ill - feelings, emotions, heart and spirit, as well as coronary arteries, liver, kidneys or joints. To see how Jesus healed the whole person, we can look at a case study found in Mark 5: 25-34: the healing of the woman with the haemorrhage.

By using reason, imagination, and the leading of the Holy Spirit, we can add details to the story which, although not included in the written text, were most likely present. This woman suffered from irregular uterine bleeding for twelve years. The diagnosis? Certainly not cancer; probably a hormonal imbalance. Presumably she had pain with her bleeding that interfered with her daily routine. She was anaemic, weak, and unable to perform her duties in the home and family. I assume she was childless because, with this hormonal imbalance, she could not conceive. Infertility was a very serious problem for Jewish women, as it is for women in all cultures. Here then is the physical context: a woman with a serious and longstanding gynaecological problem.

The social context was worse. According to Levitical law (Lv 15), a woman was unclean during her normal menstrual periods and for seven days thereafter. She was also unclean during any irregular times of bleeding. During these periods, she made unclean her clothes, her house, any furniture or objects she touched, and anyone with whom she came in physical contact. So for twelve long years she herself had been unclean and she rendered her whole world unclean. If she had been married, her husband had most certainly divorced her, her family had probably abandoned her, and she had no friends. Finally, Mark says she was penniless, having spent all her money on futile attempts to be cured.

Imagine then, her psychological condition: rejection, sorrow, anguish, bitterness, and perhaps anger at society and at God. Perhaps her biggest burden, however, was the spiritual problem. Because she was unclean, she could not go to the temple to worship God, to pray, to offer a gift, to confess her sins, or to plead for help. Socially she was abandoned; psychologically she was in anguish, and spiritually she was in despair. So Mark is not presenting to us simply a 'gynaecological case.' He speaks truly when he says, 'There was a woman who suffered terribly' in the totality of her life.

One day this woman heard about Jesus, and hope dawned in her heart. However, she herself could not go to Jesus to ask for help for she would render this important man unclean. Another man could go for her - her husband, a brother, a friend, but she had no-one. She was completely abandoned and had no-one to intercede for her.

In her misery she conceived a desperate and dangerous plan; she would come up behind Jesus secretly, in the middle of a crowd of people, and touch his clothes. Doing this without being detected was absolutely essential, because if anyone caught her, she would be publicly accused and probably stoned to death.

When she touched Jesus' cloak, she immediately felt something in her body and knew she must escape immediately. But alas, it was impossible. This man Jesus exposed her. She had insulted him. She had made him unclean. Furthermore, she had stolen Jesus' power. Now he was calling her and she would probably be stoned. So, as Mark described, she came terror-stricken, fell at Jesus' feet and told him the whole story.

Why did Jesus expose this woman? He knew she had been physically healed. We doctors are usually delighted when we have healed someone physically. Could Jesus not be content with that? No, because the woman herself had not been healed; her life had not yet been restored. Jesus wanted to heal her as a whole person, so he called her back to

him. As she lay prostrate on the ground before Jesus, waiting to hear words of condemnation, she heard instead two absolutely incredible words, and these two words healed her. She heard Jesus say to her, 'My daughter'.

For 35 years I have practised medicine and surgery in Africa. I have cared for countless women with bleeding problems and infertility. I have done hundreds, perhaps thousands of curettages. But how often have I spoken a word that has healed the whole person, which has restored spirit, mind, feelings, and emotions to health? I must admit, very few times. But that has been because of ignorance, and I am now coming to understand how the heart, mind, spirit, and often the body can be healed by Christ.

Healing the heart

What heals the broken heart and the wounded spirit? What heals the heart is simply a word spoken to the depths of the spirit of the sick person. It is a word that is understood by the spirit of the person in such a way as to resolve the psycho-spiritual pathology - the fear, the conflicts, the anxiety, the guilt, the despair. When this word heals the inner pathology, the whole person can be healed.

When Jesus spoke to this woman, with her ears she heard him say, 'My daughter.' In her spirit she heard him say, 'I love you. I accept you. You are worthy to live in my family. You are now healed and made whole'. What she heard in her heart resolved immediately the fear, the rejection, and the despair that were destroying her life. Her heart, mind, and spirit were healed just as her body had been healed. Her dignity was restored and she could return to her family.

This healing word can be just one or two words, like those spoken by Jesus to this woman. It may be a longer explanation, instructions, or a story. It can be a passage from the Bible, a word spoken in prayer, or a message spoken to the heart by the Holy Spirit himself. It can also be a picture, a visible image, a symbol which, when perceived by the deep mind, resolves the inner conflicts and brings peace and wholeness. God described this process to the prophet Isaiah in chapter 6, verse 10. 'Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull, and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.' Can doctors heal the whole person?

Is it possible for us, as doctors who know Jesus, to heal the whole person in this way? Yes it is, but we cannot do it alone. Here are the reasons why:

1. We do not always have time. To listen to the story of a person's life, as Jesus did with this woman, takes much time.
2. We have not been trained for this. Listening to a person's story and then discerning the word needed to heal the heart requires training and experience.
3. We are almost completely preoccupied with physical technology. We rarely think of the psychological, social, or spiritual life of sick persons who come to us for help.

There is, however, a way we can heal the whole person. It is by bringing together a healing team of Christian healthcare professionals and pastoral care persons. In addition to their scientific knowledge and skills, all of the team members including doctors need to have a deep knowledge of the Bible and of the immense resources Christ has made available to us for healing broken hearts and wounded spirits.

It is more than adding psychology to the medical armamentarium. Psychology is important, and practiced by Christians it can be useful. However, the wounds of the spirit

require more than psychological counselling. Psychology cannot forgive sin, absolve guilt, or heal despair. Healing of heart, mind, and spirit requires both the indwelling presence of the Spirit of Jesus, and the application of the healing power of the blood of Jesus Christ to the hurting heart. Only these can heal the guilt, fear, pain, and brokenness of the heart. The restored heart can now strengthen the body. In some cases, although by no means all, physical healing follows the inner healing. It is for us as the body of Christ to bring Christ and his healing words to all who are ill, who hurt, or who are in despair.

The Vanga example

In 1984, God brought onto the staff of the Vanga Hospital in the Democratic Republic of Congo a remarkable young Congolese woman. Rev Mrs Matala is a pastor trained in hospital pastoral counselling. Combining a deep relationship with Christ, a thorough grasp of the Bible, a knowledge of her own culture and the gifts of discernment and wisdom, Mrs Matala is a healer just as I am as a doctor. We refer to her persons suffering from a variety of medical problems, physical as well as psychosomatic, and we see remarkable things happen. As Jesus listened to the bleeding woman, Mrs Matala listens to their problems to discern what is the real pathology of heart and spirit. We call her our 'heart doctor'. She is not a cardiologist, but she knows how to bring healing to broken hearts and wounded spirits.

She gently introduces sick persons to Christ, and many of them enter into a saving relationship with him. We have found that a personal relationship with Jesus Christ has great therapeutic benefit. It permits people to unload their hurts, their pain, their sin, and their brokenness on Jesus and find the healing, peace, and restoration he can bring. Often physical illnesses are resolved in the process, and the whole person is healed.

A boy with tuberculosis

A 16-year-old boy, whom we will call John, came to our hospital very sick with tuberculosis. We hospitalised him and put him on our standard anti-tuberculosis regime. We were not overly anxious, because we know that medication is effective. However, one month later, his condition was worse. We assumed it was because his bacilli were resistant, so we switched him to the more expensive four-drug regimen. He did not respond to this either. After another month he was dying and we did not know why.

A student nurse caring for him informed us one day that John had been cursed. It seems that his parents were very poor and did not have money to pay his school fees. They had borrowed money from an uncle so John could go to school. Some months later, when the uncle demanded repayment, they were unable to do so. The uncle became angry and cursed John. He said, 'Your son will get sick. You can take him to the hospital and the doctors can give him all kinds of medicine, but he will die'. That was exactly what was happening.

Mrs Matala spent hours with John. She helped him into a relationship with Christ, and read to him the many things Christ did. She then asked John an important question: 'Who is stronger, Jesus or your uncle?' When John realised that Jesus was stronger than his uncle and that he now belonged to Jesus, the fear in his heart was healed.

Next she asked him if his uncle had done wrong to him. He replied, 'Of course. He tried to kill me'. She read what Jesus told us we must do with those who do us wrong, and she asked John if he could forgive his uncle. This was difficult, but John was finally able to do so. The anger and hatred in his heart were thus healed. Within a few days, John's fever disappeared and his appetite returned. He began gaining weight and was soon on the way to full recovery. Medicine alone failed. Medicine plus Jesus healed John and made him whole.

From a medical point of view, what happened? John's original problem was a social problem, a disruption in the family. From this came the curse which devastated John's spirit, taking away his meaning and purpose. This affected his emotions, filling his heart with fear, anger, and hatred. These negative emotions stimulated the production of neuropeptides that depressed his immune system. As a result his normal defences could not combat the tuberculosis bacilli. It was only when Christ resolved his psycho-spiritual problems through caring, medical and pastoral staff that his immune system recovered and he was able to overcome the tuberculosis infection.

Conclusion

Let me outline how we can bring medicine and faith back together under Christ:

1. Healthcare professionals must understand who the whole person is and how thoughts, feelings, emotions and desires affect our total health and healing.
2. We need to understand what Christ has done to make his healing power available to us for healing the heart, mind and spirit of sick persons.
3. We need to learn how to refer sick persons to pastoral caregivers and how to work together with them as a team.
4. Pastoral caregivers need to understand and experience the immense healing resources of the Bible and what Christ has accomplished for the healing of our hearts, spirits, and bodies. They need to know how to help sick persons appropriate these resources for their own healing.
5. Medical and pastoral leaders need to find ways to develop this team approach in hospitals, clinics, and private practice situations. We must try to involve the whole congregation in the many aspects of this healing ministry.

This integrated medico-pastoral approach to healing the whole person is now functioning in at least 20 hospitals in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Some are government ones; others belong to the church. This approach is also beginning in West Africa and in Kenya.

St Paul said that God's plan is '... to bring all things together under Christ.' We can play a crucial part in this by allowing God to work through us healthcare professionals and church leaders to reunite medicine and faith because, as God told Moses, 'I am the Lord who heals you'.

Dan Fountain

References

1. See Dr. Hans Selye's studies on the effects of stress on the body.