

Humanizing the Practice of Modern Medicine

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As an evolving society, we are increasingly conscious and cognizant about tracing as well as addressing violence in any form. However, many a times, we fail to acknowledge that even well-intended actions may inflict harm, overweighing the good achieved. While physical harm is often easily noticeable, the impact of violence on social, mental, and incorporeal aspects of humans and society is often underestimated and not well quantifiable. This editorial aims to reflect upon modern health care in the same light.

Modern healthcare delivery, with its disease-centric approach, is full of such contradictions, often driving away people to seek alternatives or choose to bear with suffering. Although it is based on a strong foundation of basic and clinical sciences and comprehensively addresses most acute illnesses and modifies the course of many chronic illnesses, it is driven by high technology. It addresses mainly the physical aspects of a being, largely overriding the body's efforts to correct itself and achieve homeostasis. This often causes many avoidable side effects. Modern health care fails to address human suffering in all dimensions. It is also driven by market forces making it expensive and inaccessible to the masses.

Aggressive and forceful approaches to address diseased conditions have their roots in the distant past since these enabled faster relief from debilitating symptoms. Over time, in spite of its limitations, this approach evolved to be the mainstay of modern treatment. Ironically, these approaches employ many metaphors of aggressiveness to define different disease processes, treatment strategies and techniques, driven by a killing instinct toward mitigating the causative agents. Cancer treatment is an apt example to learn from where and how such thoughts have influenced our approaches.

American President Richard Nixon's proclamation of war on cancer in 1971 and other international efforts enabled great progress in understanding cancer and the development of sophisticated strategies to eliminate it. Yet, winning the war on cancer is not in sight in spite of the progress made in the effective treatment and control of various types of cancer. History has shown us that lasting peace cannot be achieved through violent means alone, by subduing or eliminating simmering discontent and inflicting collateral damage, without addressing core concerns in any society. Disparities, discontentment, and deviant behavior crop up again to invite the onslaught of brutal forces. This principle applies not only to societal issues but also to our approach to cancer. Cancer is often treated as an adversary to be ravaged, leading to aggressive treatments that can cause significant harm to patients. Chemotherapy and radiation, for example, while effective at killing cancer cells, also damage healthy cells and can have serious side effects. Such has been the way we understood and dealt with cancer.

Drawing a parallel with terrorism, eliminating a few with deviant behavior in a society does not eradicate terrorism, unless we address issues in general at the macro as well as the micro level.

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This includes societal and economic disparities, efforts focused on the welfare of all, and an opportunity for those deviants to get reformed to be useful members of society again. Lasting peace can only be achieved through love and compassion. Similarly, targeting and destroying cancer cells alone will not lead to a cure. Cancer cells need to be seen in the same light as deviant individuals. Cancer should not only be seen as a cluster of rogue cells to be eliminated but also as a symptom of underlying issues within the body's environment. This means creating an environment within the body that discourages the growth of cancer cells and promotes overall health. Let us win over cancer through non-violent means bringing changes in the macro as well as microenvironment of the body, enabling cancerous cells to get reformed, to learn, to coexist in harmony and or die a natural death peacefully, without causing collateral damage. An integrated medicine approach adopting our rich heritage and knowledge of traditional medicine and the discipline of Yoga may bridge these gaps in the continuum of care.

Integrated medicine combines modern treatments with complementary therapies such as diet and nutrition therapy, physical exercise, stress management, and mind-body practices, and focuses on treating the whole person rather than just the disease. This holistic approach can help create a healthier internal milieu that is less conducive to cancer progression.

At the macro level, factors, such as diet, lifestyle, and environmental exposures that contribute to cancer development and progression need to be addressed. A healthy lifestyle, including regular physical activity, a diet rich in fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, and avoiding the consumption of harmful substances, such as tobacco and excessive alcohol can reduce cancer risk. Additionally, minimizing exposure to environmental carcinogens, such as pollution and toxic chemicals, is crucial.

Focus on the micro level may include creating a cellular environment that discourages cancer growth, optimizing the body's immune system to detect and eliminate cancer cells more effectively, reducing inflammation, and ensuring proper cellular

function. Advances in personalized medicine and genomics enable treatments tailored to an individual's specific characteristics of their cancer and unique genetic makeup, which can be more effective and less harmful.

Our understanding of carcinogenesis shows that cancer is not merely a collection of malignant cells but a complex interaction between the tumor and its surrounding environment, including the immune system, blood vessels, and other cells. By targeting the tumor microenvironment and internal milieu of the body promoting overall health, we can create conditions that make it difficult for cancer cells to thrive.

Furthermore, psychosocial factors play a significant role in cancer. Stress, for example, has been linked to cancer progression. Providing psychological support, stress management techniques, and fostering a positive outlook can improve patients' quality of life and potentially influence their course of disease and outcome of treatment.

The notion of winning the war on cancer in a non-violent manner is not just a utopian notion; it is a pragmatic approach that aligns with our growing understanding of cancer and its progression.

Analogies between cancer progression and natural ecosystems may also help understand the complex dynamics of cancer within the human body. Healthy ecosystems maintain a balance of various species, each playing a specific role in ensuring the stability and sustainability of the ecosystem. Entry of an unwanted invasive species in the ecosystem that lacks natural predators and controls, disrupts this balance, leading to the depletion of resources and a decline in biodiversity. Natural ecosystems have built-in regulatory mechanisms, such as predators, diseases, and environmental changes that help control populations and maintain balance.

Conservation efforts restore balance by controlling invasive species, reintroducing native species, and restoring habitats.

Implementing sustainable practices helps maintain ecosystem health and prevent future imbalances.

Viewing cancer progression through the lens of natural ecosystems highlights the importance of balance, regulation, and the impact of invasive forces. Effective cancer treatment benefits from an integrative approach that combines conventional and alternative therapies. This analogy highlights the need for holistic and sustainable practices in both ecological conservation and cancer care.

Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gita* resolves for Arjuna the predicament of looking at himself as a "doer." He states that we are not the doers of our actions because we are a part of an interconnected network of factors and the outcome of our actions depends not solely on us but on the culmination of these various factors. Healthcare providers in modern medicine assume the role of doer, sometimes inflicting more harm than benefit. Suffering humans get overwhelmed by their medical interventions and pharmacotherapy, leaving little autonomy for the individual and the bodily systems to heal themselves through the process of homeostasis. Taming the sense of being a doer, a physician, or a healthcare provider can perform better as a facilitator of healing.

Viewing cancer treatment as a healing journey rather than a battle can reduce stress and promote a more holistic approach to care. Emphasizing the partnership between patients and healthcare providers in managing cancer can foster a more supportive and empowering environment.

Combining mainstream aggressive therapies with gentle and wholesome therapies offers a comprehensive approach to cancer treatment. This integrative strategy can enhance the effectiveness of traditional treatments while mitigating their side effects and improving the overall quality of life for patients. By focusing on the whole person and not just the disease, healthcare providers can offer a more balanced, humane, and effective approach to managing cancer.