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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### METAPHOR AND MEDICINE

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#### ABSTRACT

What is sound medical practice? The way in which this question is answered will depend in large part on which root metaphor is selected to underscore a particular medical practice. Medical knowledge, like all knowledge, is built around three root metaphors—mechanism, organism, and spiritualism (or mind). These root metaphors, in turn, have given rise to what may be called guiding metaphors. In medicine these three guiding metaphors are—the war on disease, the pursuit of optimal health, and the quest for wholeness. The objective of medicine is to help humanity to live longer, healthier, and happier lives. What choices can we make for ourselves to promote our personal well being?

#### INTRODUCTION

A good metaphor is worth its weight in gold, or at least a Pulitzer Prize. Root metaphors are particularly golden. They are the *sine qua non* underscoring abstract thinking. This is particularly true when it comes to the practice of medicine. There are three root metaphors underlying all medical prescriptions—mechanism, organism, and spiritualism (or mind). The way a doctor thinks about his or her profession will be shaped by the dominant root metaphor underlying his or her practice. In addition to the three root metaphors, medicine has formulated three guiding metaphors—the war on disease, the pursuit of optimal health, and the quest for wholeness. What is considered desirable medical practice is closely tied to which metaphors a doctor has accepted.

#### ROOT METAPHORS

**Mechanism.** Many doctors tend to think about their profession in mechanical terms. During the Enlightenment the French philosopher, La Mettrie, wrote a classic book, *Man the Machine*. Conventional medical practice has capitalized on La Mettrie's metaphor. Like all machines, the human body is prone to breaking down. When this happens, the doctor's role is similar to that of a mechanic, diagnose the failure and repairing it. The doctor's tools are the scalpel, powerful pills, and when necessary radiation. The body, like a used car, requires more tinkering the longer it has been in service.

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My family physician once remarked that the Lord had made only one mistake. He should have placed a zipper on the uterus so that when it was no longer in service it could be easily removed. Surgeons have gotten quite good at replacing worn out joints like knees, hips and shoulders with artificial ones. Though the doctor's guiding metaphor is one of combating disease, no sooner has one been arrested than two new ones appear to take its place. Covid-19 caught everyone by surprise.

#### ORGANISM

The body is a wonderfully complex organism. Every human being began life as a fertilized ovum. Mother Nature guides human growth and development. How to maintain a healthy body and mind? The doctor is nature's helper. His guiding metaphor is the pursuit of optimal health. A healthy life-style can be achieved through proper diet, appropriate exercise, and a positive outlook on life. People should consume fewer cigarettes and whiskey and eat more whole grains and bean sprouts. Junk foods are just what their name implies, junk! More people need to get up off the couch and head to the gym. The best defense against disease is a healthy body and mind. Though the body is equipped with its own healing powers, sometimes it requires a little tweaking. That is where alternative therapies come into play. Have you ever visited a chiropractor? A man by the name of Palmer discovered his deaf neighbor had vertebrae in his neck out of line (or so the story goes). When the bones were pressed back into line, the neighbor's hearing was suddenly restored. Chiropractors believe the key to optimal health is the unrestrained flow of

energy down the spine. Massage is another alternative therapy. Given a strained muscle, who wouldn't elect to have a good massage? The local health food store has almost as many pills as the town's pharmacy. Vitamin C is good for whatever ails you. Turmeric, which is of ancient origins, is celebrated as a new all purpose healing agent. Green tea and Ginseng are good for an unsettled stomach. Exercise possesses powerful recuperative powers. The author had a heart attack for his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. It left him with a left ventricular ejection factor of 25%. By going to the gym and lifting weights for two hours a day, six days a week, over a 20 month period the ejection factors improved to 55%, which is pretty close to normal for a man over the age of 80 (Records available on request).

**Spiritualism:** Is Universal Intelligence at work in the cosmos? The majority of humanity believes the answer is yes! Life is a quest for mental, physical, and spiritual wholeness. Healing, if it is to be successful, must take all three factors into consideration. Yoga, meditation, and prayer are tools for getting in touch with one's Higher Self. Eastern medicine uses a wide variety of different herbs along with acupuncture in order to balance the energies in the body. Psychic readers will tell you about the colors emanating from your chakras, which are energy centers in the body. All of the world's religions recognize the healing powers of prayer. If a person is seriously ill, elders from the community frequently gather around the person and perform healing rituals. Christian Scientists hold to the view that disease is a figment of our imaginations. Sickness does not exist in God's world. Illness is nothing more than faulty thinking. We have all heard stories of miraculous healings. A friend of mine smoked a pack of cigarettes every day for 30 years. One morning, following his usual pattern, he found himself looking in the bathroom mirror, a cigarette in one hand and a cup of coffee in the other. Suddenly a voice spoke to him saying: "You don't have to do that anymore." He put out the cigarette and never looked back. There were no withdrawal symptoms. It was as if he had never smoked before in his life.

### Conclusion

The body is a magnificent self-regulating system. It tends to do a fantastic job of looking after our needs. There are times, however, when the body breaks down. On such occasions, common sense dictates that we look for some special help.

If we detect breast cancer or we experience a heart attack, there is no substitute for a good surgeon. Antibiotics have proved to be a godsend, though many bacteria have now developed their own immunities. Which drug to prescribe and for what malady?

That remains an open question. There is no comprehensive theory of pharmacology—if we mix A and B it will necessarily give us a cure for Z. Sometime what is one person's miracle drug is the next person's poison. Advances in gene based therapies offer some hope for placing pharmacology on a less "cookbook" basis. The trick in life is one of establishing proper balances. Hospitals, dietary clinics, and sweat lodges all have a role to play in our physical, mental, and spiritual well-being. Which practitioners to visit and on what occasions? That is part of the art of living. There is no substitute for good judgment. But here we run into catch 22, good judgment comes from experience, and experience comes from living. No one starts life with a readymade fund of personal experience. The wisdom of one person cannot be transferred to another. It is important to listen to the advice of others, but in the end we all have to follow our own intuition. Or, as Robert Frost so aptly put it, "Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference."

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