

Herbal medicine

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Being a part of alternative medicine, herbalism is often opposed to orthodox medicine. I believe that herbalism can make a good competition to conventional medicine as it has not only a set of methods to cure people, but also a developed philosophical and cultural background, which makes it a complicated system. Herbal Medicine is a medical system, which helps to maintain good health and prevent illnesses.

Herbal practitioners state that good health is much more than an absence of disease. Normal functioning of the body and good work of all systems and organs of an organism is the main and ultimate goal of alternative medicine.

History of Herbal Medicine The history of herbalism counts more than five hundred years. Western herbal medicine was founded about 5000 years ago. Since ancient times humans used herbs for food, medicine and making clothes. The term “ herb” is usually used to speak about the plant which is used for medical purposes. So called “ herbs” have been used for centuries to treat people from different diseases. Archaeologists say that herbs have been used by humans since the Middle Paleolithic era, which is dated more than 61, 000 years ago. (Butterfield) Herbal remedies were used in Egypt, Greece, Rome and Middle East.

Columbus and other travelers who succeeded him brought a lot of new herbal remedies to Europe. Herbal remedies became especially popular during the era of Henry VIII. A new science, which combined the use of herbs and astrology, was developed during his rule. Herbal medicine was used for centuries and modern medicine did not appear until the end of the Second World War. Technological development made it possible to produce synthetic drugs, which gradually replaced herbal remedies. Nowadays herbal plants

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become more and more popular. People start realizing that reducing pain symptoms is not enough to cure illness.

Herbal medicine is able to give them alternative to orthodox medicine, which treats only symptoms but not the causes of the illnesses. Nowadays there is a separate branch of herbalism called pharmacognosy. This science is preoccupied with the study of drugs produced from plants and animals. There are a lot of sources from which people obtain knowledge about the characteristics of different plants. “ Much herbal knowledge is obtained through attentive empirical observation of a plant's effects on humans. In some traditions, intuition and sacred teachings are important.

Many traditional herbalists believe in a 'life force' that is yet to be fully understood. ” (Mysteriously, 119) In addition by mystical approach, modern science gives rational explanations of different components, which create a healing effect of herbs. Only specialists know that a lot of modern medicines used in pharmacology originally derived from plants. Components, which are used to produce synthetic medicaments, derive from natural products. For example, aspirin was originally produced from the bark of willow tree and morphine is achieved from poppy.

Most herbs used in herbal medicine have well-studied and explained peculiarities, which explain their curing effect. Old art of herbal treating is almost forgotten now and synthetic drugs have replaced natural products but people start remembering about the positive effect of herbal treatment and it becomes more and more popular in the modern world. Scientific study gives additional reasons to make confidence in alternative medicine in

general and herbalism in particular. Scientists continue to uncover new qualities of herbs, which give additional opportunities in the sphere of medicine.

“ In 1993, the British medical journal Lancet reported that in tests conducted in both Germany and Italy, extracts from the ancient Chinese ginkgo tree were successful in treating cerebral insufficiency in older patients. As a remedy that improves the circulation of blood to the head, it is able to help the memory of elderly people. ” (Bruno) Ancient people, who could cure practically any disease with the help of herbs possessed knowledge practically lost nowadays. Latest statistics shows that interest to herbal treatment has increased during recent time.

People are looking for the ways to be healthy and holistic approach used by herbal medicine appeals to many of them. Herbalism as a Part of Alternative Medicine Usually herbal remedies are used by the practitioners of so called holistic medicine, who believe that there is inner force inside of each human being and this force can help to maintain physical and mental health. Despite the practitioners of holistic medicine do not reject germ theory of illness applied in traditional medicine, they state that this theory does not give convincing explanations about the reasons of illnesses.

As states Leonard Bruno in his article Western Herbal Remedies: “ They argue that many diseases and conditions come about because the individual's inner force or natural immune system is weakened or out of balance. Therefore, they prescribe herbal or plant remedies that are found in nature in order to return an individual's natural inner balance, strengthen the

resistance to disease, and maintain good health. ” (Bruno) Herbalists use a plant as a whole to treat their patients. In contrast to conventional medicine, where healing characteristics of medicines are based on single chemical constituents, herbal specialists use plants.

Each plant provides a unique combination of elements and curing effect is achieved by this unique combination. Herbalists believe that even if we take a combination of all components, which constitute one plant, they will not be as effective as same components, which are found in this plant. So called “ whole plant” philosophy is based on the idea that plant is much more than a sum of its components. Each plant consists of hundreds of different elements and their combination is unique for each plant. This combination gives plant its unique characteristics, which are used in herbal medicine.

An effect, created by the sum of components and elements contained in the plant is called synergism. This peculiarity of herbal medicine becomes a subject of controversy because it is not accepted by conventionally trained professionals. The list of active constituents can not serve as an explanation of curing effects of herbal medicines. Herbal remedies influence human body in same chemical manner as synthetic drugs do. From the other side there are several distinctions, which make an effect of herbal medicines and synthetic drugs on organism different.

Herbal medicines consist of difficult combination of different elements and these elements affect several organs. These elements get to blood by indirect ways that is why their effect can be not as quick as the one of synthetic medicines but it will definitely be more extensive. Herbs generally

make a complex pharmaceutical system. They contain vitamins, minerals, trace elements of different oils, alkaloids, tannins and many other elements. Complexity of effects herbs have on human organism can be traced on different examples.

For example, both, tea and coffee contain practically similar doses of caffeine but everybody knows that coffee usually has stronger stimulating effect. This effect can be explained by big quantity of tannin, contained in tea. Tannin prevents caffeine from absorbing and this reduces tea's stimulating effect. (Holmes, 118) Another example is a comparison of synthetic antibiotics and garlic. Garlic is known as one of the best natural antibiotics but its action is based in principles, which differ from the action of antibiotics.

Antibiotics kill bacteria and stop illness. But they kill all kinds of bacteria, including ones which are necessary for good functioning of an organism. In contrast to synthetic antibiotics, garlic does not kill bacteria useful for organism and even vice versa, stimulates them. Since herbal treatment is based on holistic approach qualified herbalist starts his treatment with long interview with a patient. His interview sometimes covers different spheres of client's life because in alternative medicine physical health is not separated from mental and emotional state.

Latest researches prove that a lot of illnesses have psychosomatic nature and that is why it is not enough to treat only physical side of the problem. The cause of the problem, which causes an illness, can sometimes differ from a diagnosis made by mainstream professionals. Special diet and

exercising can be added to the course of herbal treatment in order to improve the result. Peculiarities of Herbal Medicine Herbal treatment can be used for treating practically all known diseases and in the most cases herbs can replace synthetic drugs used in conventional medicine.

Effectiveness of herbs is proved by multiple investigations. Herbal remedies are used for different purposes. They can improve digestion, stimulate respiratory and circulatory systems of organism. Other kinds of herbal remedies are used to improve the functioning of nervous and endocrine systems. Stimulating these systems helps to strengthen immune system. Herbs perfectly remove toxins from organism. Usually herbs are classified according to the sphere of their use. Some herbs are used to stimulate nervous activity, other have antiseptic action and are used to treat infections. Medical use of herbs is diverse.

Herbs are used to make oils, infusions, tinctures, and salves. There are several ways of herbal administration. Herbs can be drunk, others are used for external treatment only. There are special herbal capsules. Mainstream physicians rarely prescribe herbal treatment and those, who want to be treated with the help of herbs should find qualified herbalist or naturopathic physician. Unfortunately, insurance companies very rarely cover the cost of herbal treatment. This kind of treatment can be covered only in the cases when herbal treatment is prescribed by mainstream physician. Herbalism vs. Conventional Medicine

Conventional medicine is often opposed to herbalism. There are several key differences, which differ these two systems. Despite orthodox medicine is a

dominating medical system there are a lot of people who turn to alternative methods, including herbal remedies. There are several factors, which explain this phenomenon. First of all orthodox medicine shows its failure. There are a lot of cases when synthetic drugs can not help people. As states Williams, “ the vacuum created by the abandonment of nutrition by orthodox medicine, is directly responsible for nutrition becoming an alternative therapy.

In other words, the so called food faddists and nutrition quacks so often complained about by the medical profession, owe their very existence and continued survival to orthodox medicine! Nature, as they say, abhors a vacuum. “(Williams, 112) Growing popularity of herbal medicine proves his thesis about the failing of orthodox medicine. The conflict between conventional and herbal medicine presents two different systems of believes. These two systems show two different approaches to human health.

Representatives of orthodox medicine do not want any changes to occur.

They do not recognize alternative medicine as a valid system of treating people. At the same time there are representatives of orthodox medicine, who use alternative methods as a supplementary means to their orthodox methods. In this case we meet a kind of controversy when orthodox specialists use separate holistic methods while rejecting holistic medicine in general. Conventional medicine does not use individual approach to each patient. In conventional medicine all similar symptoms are usually treated by same medicines.

“ Many patients feel alienated by their physicians, who do not always seem to treat them as individuals. This alienation is compounded by the often

extreme costs of high-tech medicine. Further, many synthetic drugs have adverse side effects, or have been overused to the point of no longer being effective” (Bruno) Modern herbalism is based on several principles. First of all its main goal is to optimize health and wellness. The accent in treatment is made on the state of the person as a whole, but not separate symptoms. Individual approach is one of main principles of herbal medicine.

Uniqueness of each individual is a main treasure in herbal medicine. Such an approach is contrasted to conventional medicine which uses standard approach to all patients. Conventional medicine uses a single drug to treat single disease. Herbal medicine treats each patient individually. Herbal specialists believe that similar symptoms of illnesses can be caused by different reasons and that is why they treat each person individually. Herbal medicine is based on the principle of fragile balance, which maintains our mind and body in healthy condition. When this balance is broken a disease starts.

In this case disease is regarded as a signal about broken balance and that is why herbal medicine makes everything possible to renew the balance. Such an approach can not guarantee quick treating of all symptoms because all treatment is directed to renew balance. Specialists of herbal medicine believe that organism is able to cure itself as soon as its balance is renewed. As states Leonard Bruno “ Thus the person who takes an herbal remedy should not always expect to see all symptoms disappear immediately, since the natural medicine is intended rather to support the body's systems.

The proper functioning body will then remedy the symptoms” (Bruno) Holistic approach used in herbalism is contrasted to philosophy of reductionism, expressed by conventional medicine. Orthodox medicine aims to achieve the state of optimum health where people experience as little pain symptoms as possible. Holistic medicine derives from the notion of holism or balanced functioning of an organism, which becomes the main source of healthy condition. As states Williams in his book Nutrition against Disease “ Unlike reductionism, holism does not seek to fragment, or impose artificial limitations upon, human knowledge and learning.

Rather than dissect the body into numerous separate and independent functional areas , it recognises the interdependence of our various bodily systems. ” (Williams, 79) When speaking about dissecting the body into pieces, he definitely speaks about orthodox medicine, which does not regard human body as a one organic unity and treats each symptom and each organ separately. Merits and Demerits of Herbal Medicine Herbal remedies have a lot of advantages. First of all they are natural products, which have mild effect on human organism. Herbal medicines can be used to treat practically all illnesses.

Along with positive sides, herbal medicine have some demerits. Herbal medicines do not have so quick effect as synthetic drugs do. Like it was mentioned before herbal medicines treat the causes of an illness, not its symptoms, that is why it can require longer course of treatment to treat all dysfunctions of an organism. People should be aware that using herbal and conventional medicines together without the doctor’s advice can be

dangerous. Synthetic and herbal medicines can come in conflict and cause negative effect on human organism.

Despite all advantages of herbal medicine and its good impact on human health it is necessary to remember about potential dangers when using herbs for medical purpose. The most toxic and dangerous medicines are produced from plants. Natural origin of herbal medication does not make them completely safe. There is a danger of misuse or overuse of medicines produced from plants. It is true that the most remedies produced from plants are safe but it is still necessary to address a doctor before using herbs as medicines.

In addition there is danger of different reactions when herbal remedies are used together with conventional medicines. That is why each person must consult a herbalist before turning to herb treatment. Possible demerits of herbal medicines are fully compensated by positive sides of these remedies. In the most cases herbal remedies are not less effective than synthetic drugs but have much less side effects, if any. Most of conventional drugs have many side effects. Treating one symptom, they hurt other part of an organism. Natural remedies never or very seldom cause side effects.

Herbal medicines can make an alternative to practically all synthetic drugs and using them people can escape negative effects of synthetic drugs.

Natural remedies are especially suitable for children who are very sensitive to different chemical components. Herbalism becomes very popular among young parents, who try to use only natural products for their small children. Natural remedies can be used for people, who are allergic to synthetic drugs.

Herbalism uses holistic approach, which helps to treat an organism as one whole and individual approach helps to choose treatment effective for each separate individual.

That is the reason people turn to herbal medicines again. Conclusion Western history of medicine is mainly the history of herbal medicine and I am sure that herbalism will occupy deserved place in the future medical system. Since ancient times people used herbs to treat different diseases and it was hard to find any disease which could not have being cured with the help of herbal remedies. Herbal medicine went through the period of decline during the time after the Second World War.

During this time synthetic drugs replaced herbs and people turned to so called conventional medicine. Nowadays the situation is changed again and people start using more and more herbal medicines. Latest research made by the World Health Organization states that more than 80 percent of people turn to herbal treatment in different forms and believe that it is an effective medical method. (Micozzi) Dispute between herbal and conventional medicine lasts since the development of orthodox medicine and both sides have strong arguments to defend their positions.

Herbal medicine is an effective system of treatment and prevention disease and scientific recognition it gets in the official world, is a good proof of its effectiveness. If we consider all reasons pro et contra herbal medicine, we will understand that it deserves to occupy a descent place in the modern world. May be it will not be able to replace orthodox medicine but it can be used as an alternative way of treatment in many cases. Lack of information

about alternative types of treatment often deprives people of additional opportunities to choose treatments suitable for them.

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