



Functional Medicine — a New Approach to Healthcare

by Dr. James Proodian

I am often asked what I see as the future of healthcare. The answer I routinely give is rooted in a new concept in healthcare called “Functional Medicine.” Unlike traditional medicine, which focuses on the treatment of symptoms, functional medicine is a new dynamic that focuses on disease prevention first, and the treatment of the underlying causes of disease — instead of just the symptoms — if disease does occur.

The functional medicine movement is rapidly gaining momentum in the United States. It is a clear vision of the future of healthcare that I believe most people will embrace as they become better educated on its many advantages over traditional medicine.

Leading this education process is the Institute for Functional Medicine (IFM), an organization of which I am a proud member and whose methods I employ in my own practice. As part of their education efforts they have provided an excellent description of what functional medicine is, which I have included below with their permission.

With the skyrocketing cost of healthcare now a national debate, it's time we focus not just on cost containment but also on developing a new approach to healthcare that results in improved health and lower cost for all Americans.

What is Functional Medicine?

Functional medicine is personalized medicine that deals with primary prevention and underlying causes instead of symptoms for serious chronic disease.

It is a science-based field of healthcare that is grounded in the following principles:

- 1) Biochemical individuality describes the importance of individual variations in metabolic function that derive from genetic and environmental differences among individuals.
- 2) Patient-centered medicine emphasizes "patient care" rather than "disease care," following Sir William Osler's admonition that "It is more important to know what patient has the disease than to know what disease the patient has."

- 3) Dynamic balance of internal and external factors.
- 4) Web-like interconnections of physiological factors - an abundance of research now supports the view that the human body functions as an orchestrated network of interconnected systems, rather than individual systems functioning autonomously and without effect on each other. For example, we now know that immunological dysfunctions can promote cardiovascular disease, that dietary imbalances can cause hormonal disturbances, and that environmental exposures can precipitate neurological syndromes such as Parkinson's disease.
- 5) Health as a positive vitality — not merely the absence of disease.
- 6) Promotion of organ reserve as the means to enhance health span.

Functional medicine is anchored by an examination of the core clinical imbalances that underlie various disease conditions. Those imbalances arise as environmental inputs such as diet, nutrients (including air and water), exercise and trauma and are processed by one's body, mind and spirit through a unique set of genetic predispositions, attitudes and beliefs. The fundamental physiological processes include communication, both outside and inside the cell; bioenergetics, or the transformation of food into energy; replication, repair and maintenance of structural integrity, from the cellular to the whole body level; elimination of waste; protection and defense; and transport and circulation.

The core clinical imbalances that arise from malfunctions within this complex system include:

- 1) Hormonal and neurotransmitter imbalances;
- 2) Oxidation-reduction imbalances and mitochondriopathy;
- 3) Detoxification and biotransformational imbalances;
- 4) Immune imbalances;
- 5) Inflammatory imbalances;
- 6) Digestive, absorptive and microbiological imbalances;
- 7) Structural imbalances from cellular membrane function to the musculoskeletal system.

Imbalances such as these are the precursors to the signs and symptoms by which we detect and label (diagnose) organ system disease. Improving balance — in the patient's environmental inputs and in the body's fundamental physiological processes — is the precursor to restoring health and it involves much more than treating the symptoms. Functional medicine is dedicated to improving the management of complex, chronic disease by intervening at multiple levels to address these core clinical imbalances and to restore each patient's functionality and health. Functional medicine is not a unique and separate body of knowledge. It is grounded in scientific principles and information widely available in medicine today, combining research from various disciplines into highly detailed yet clinically relevant models of disease pathogenesis and effective clinical management.

Functional medicine emphasizes a definable and teachable process of integrating multiple knowledge bases within a pragmatic intellectual matrix that focuses on functionality at many levels, rather than a single treatment for a single diagnosis. Functional medicine uses the patient's story as a key tool for integrating diagnosis, signs and symptoms, and evidence of clinical imbalances into a comprehensive approach to improve both the patient's environmental inputs and his or her physiological function. It is a clinician's discipline, and it directly addresses the need to transform the practice of primary care.

For more information on functional medicine please visit www.functionalmedicine.org or contact me directly. ■



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