

healing ways



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PERSONALIZED HEALTH CARE

Functional Medicine Leads the Way

by Linda Sechrist

Historical Overview

During the last 25 years, a less drug-based grassroots model for dealing with chronic illnesses in the U.S. has emerged. First labeled holistic, the movement gained momentum as alternative approaches morphed into being considered complementary to conventional medicine, warranting studies by the National Institutes of Health. Responding to public interest, an integrative model of care that focuses on the whole person has taken root in medical institutions such as the Cleveland Clinic, in Ohio.

The latest evolution to a systems-oriented, patient-focused clinical model of functional medicine, which seeks to address causes of illness, rather than simply treat symptoms, has been garnering increasing interest by the public and pioneering medical professionals. It's now maturing into personalized functional medicine.

New Standard of Care

One of the best-prepared, traditionally trained medical professionals in explaining this approach is Jeffrey S. Bland, Ph.D., recognized as the father of functional medicine, and author of *The Disease Delusion: Conquering the Causes of Chronic Illness for a Healthier, Longer and Happier Life*. He co-founded, with his wife, Susan, the Institute for Functional Medicine, in Washington, which provides a system geared to understanding the complexity of chronic illness and design individualized programs for more effective healing.

“Medical science didn’t have the advanced technology 25 years ago to perform the research that now helps us better understand the complexity of chronic illness, as well as our present ecological view of the body. Today we’re examining how all the networks of our biology intersect in a dynamic process that creates health when

in balance or disease when out of balance,” attests Bland, whose career has focused on searching for a unifying principle behind all healing that can be used to discern the best possible therapy for specific individuals.

Incorporating what he learned from Linus Pauling, Ph.D., two-time Nobel Prize laureate, and Lee Hood, M.D., Ph.D., as well as systems biology and practicing lifestyle medicine, Bland founded the nonprofit Personalized Lifestyle Medicine Institute (PLMInstitute.org) in 2012. Seeking to transform the entire medical approach to chronic illness, the Seattle-based organization is a virtual and onsite hub for health professionals, researchers, educators and the public to share ideas and converse about how personalized functional medicine can be delivered to everyone as an improved standard of care.

Role of Genetics

The National Human Genome Research Institute, in Bethesda, Maryland, maintains that an evolved approach to medicine starts with using an individual’s genetic profile to determine the best path to preventing, diagnosing and treating diseases. By 2003, scientists had delivered the first essentially complete sequence and map of all the genes in the human body.

Three decades ago, the medical fraternity had few reliable explanations for the origins of chronic health issues. Today, accepted factors include predispositions for a specific disease related to an individual’s genome, along with contemporary epigenetic influences such as nutrition, environment and lifestyle. None of these elements, however, necessarily define our destiny.

“This genomic personalized medicine approach is creating friends among all healing arts practitioners because it facilitates our using information to design a less-toxic environment, lifestyle, diet and treatment to meet an individual’s specific needs and particular circumstances that led to a disease,” says Bland.

“Diseases are only names assigned to a collection of symptoms,” says Bland. “They don’t indicate how the individual became afflicted. If 10 patients with Type 2 diabetes each had epigenetic variations that triggered getting the condition, it would be unwise to treat them all the same; it’s far better to treat those factors that specifically led to the disease.”

Addressing the concern that genetic test results might be used to deny someone health insurance, Bland notes, “This is a significant misunderstanding about genetic testing. Our genes don’t tell us how we are going to die. They tell us how we should live. Understanding how our genes can help us live to 100 is a model of enlightenment. Those that practice this systems biology approach are counting on functional personalized medicine becoming the updated standard of care.”

Physicians often offer genetic testing services. At-home DNA testing can be done using a saliva collection kit mailed to a laboratory, offering both ancestry and health information that must be interpreted by an informed professional.

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