

Experiencing the Ancient Indian Healthcare Science of Ayurveda Through the Immersive Experiential Prism of a Scholar from the Global North West Visiting an Ayurveda Centre in Coastal Karnataka

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Abstract

Ayurveda is an ancient age-old practice that for many centuries has developed to become the principle teaching of how to live a healthy lifestyle: “Ayurveda, the ancient traditional medicine of India, defines health as a state of complete physical, mental and spiritual well-being. The focus of Ayurveda is on a predictive, preventive and personalized medicine. This is obtained through low-cost personalized counseling about lifestyle measures (diet, activities, etc.), trying to involve the patient directly in the process of healing, increasing his self-awareness and good relationships with other people and nature”. Ayurveda approaches health from a holistic perspective. Its goal is not to reduce pain, as most modern medicine does, but to prevent it: “The person-centered point of view of Ayurveda mainly concerns the maintenance of an abiding health, preventing rather than treating diseases. If our health is compromised, the treatment resides in restoring the balance between the affected functions, the tissues, the environment and the whole organism. The nature of the individual is a parameter on which the whole system’s scale is tuned.”

Key words: *Ayurveda, public health, ancient India, healthcare, experience*

Introduction

Ayurveda is an ancient age-old practice that for many centuries has developed to become the principle teaching of how to live a healthy lifestyle: “Ayurveda, the ancient traditional medicine of India, defines health as a state of complete physical, mental and spiritual well-being. The focus of Ayurveda is on a predictive, preventive and personalized medicine. This is obtained through low-cost personalized counseling about lifestyle measures (diet, activities, etc.), trying to involve the patient directly in the process of healing, increasing

his self-awareness and good relationships with other people and nature”.¹ Ayurveda approaches health from a holistic perspective. Its goal is not to reduce pain, as most modern medicine does, but to prevent it: “The person-centered point of view of Ayurveda mainly concerns the maintenance of an abiding health, preventing rather than treating diseases. If our health is compromised, the treatment resides in restoring the balance between the affected functions, the tissues, the environment and the whole organism. The nature of the individual is a parameter on which the whole system’s scale is tuned”²

Ayurveda answers one of the most fundamental aspects of public health within itself.

The study of prevalence and distribution of disease, in Public health, is a critical aspect in the foundational principles of Ayurveda. “CEA Winslow in 1920 defined

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Public Health as, “the science and art of preventing diseases, prolonging life, and promoting health and efficiency through organized community efforts”³

The definition emphasizes on three essential features; prevention of disease, prolongation of life, and promotion of health. These three essential features have also been noted by proponents of Ayurveda like great saint Charak and others. He mentions about the objectives of Ayurveda which indirectly defines public health and its objective.⁴ Ayurveda is heavily influenced by the natural aspects of growth and development in life. In addition, Ayurveda embodies the elemental perspective of nature as well by looking at the human and nature’s interactivity: “Individuals interact with the environment through the five senses. Perceptions are generated, processed and integrated into associative memories in a complex model of reality. This model enables the individual to adequately interact both with the received stimuli and with the environment”⁵

According to Ayurveda, these relationships determine the psychological structure, psychophysical health and general balance of each organism. Health is a positive state, and it is the outcome of the adaptive feedback that each being establishes with the environment. In human terms, health is not merely a biological process; it is also a cultural one involving knowledge as well as the interaction with the situation in order to modify it.⁶ Because of this, Ayurveda has developed to become the alternate form of medicine. Whereas modern 21st-century medicine relies on the latest medical technological advancements for answers, Ayurveda relies on the past. It, through centuries, has formed the dynamic, yet all-encompassing principles formed through the process of trial and error. Because of this, Ayurveda has been a viable source for human health development and disease prevention as its ancient, yet powerful remedies have shown time and time again to answer some of nature’s hardest problems.

One of the most defining qualities of Ayurveda that makes the science so appealing to many is its use of natural elements to treat, cure, and prevent ailments. One example of this is Ayurveda stress and importance on the use of spices for treatments. This plays a tremendous factor in the public health network. As Dr. Manisha explained at the 3rd annual Sivananda

Ayurveda Conference, “spices not only give food flavor, but they have tremendous medicinal power and can be very potent in their effects. In ancient times, spices were used to preserve as well as flavor foods, and during the middle ages, women often embroidered a spring of thyme into scarfs to protect their children against illness. Even today in India, garlands of cardamom are often worn as a preventative measure against disease”⁷

With such a long history and know for their positive effect on the human body spices that range from turmeric, coriander, cumin, ginger, garlic, and cinnamon have grown to be imperative to the process of treating patients. For example, spices can be used for patients who have diabetes, cancer, heart problems and much more: “Scientific studies have shown that turmeric (*Curcuma longa* Linn.) has anticancer properties—it protects DNA and stimulates detoxifying enzymes. It also promoted wound healing, protects against her disease by decreasing low-density lipoprotein (LDL) and triglyceride levels, is antithrombotic, fights against Alzheimer’s disease”⁸ Coriander, similar as Turmeric has therapeutic qualities as well: “Coriander (*Coriandrum sativum* Linn.) protects against heart disease: it decreases levels of lipid peroxide, increases activity of antioxidant enzymes,⁷⁷ decreases total cholesterol, LDL and triglycerides, and increases high-density lipoprotein (HDL), has traditionally been used as a treatment for diabetes⁸ Cumin is another example: “Cumin (*Cuminum cyminum* Linn.) is antidiabetic; it reduces blood sugar, glycosylated hemoglobin, plasma cholesterol, tissue cholesterol, phospholipids, free fatty acids, and triglycerides. Cumin was more effective in treating diabetes than the drug glibenclamide.⁹

These are just a few of the many spices used in Ayurvedic procedures and treatments. As described, spices play have a profound effect not only on food but on the body as well. Though just powder in most physical states, spices can be the answer to health problems not even drugs can cure, as noted by Sharma. With such benefits, Indian food itself becomes a healthy alternative way of eating, if cooked right. As many Indian dishes include a variety of the species mentioned above, the delivery of these ingredients not only makes it easy to consume for the patients but also ensures preventive measures against the development of future diseases as well. This is one of the first layers of prevention that

Ayurveda ensure through its ancient, yet effective form of the public health system.

In addition to spices, herbs are also part of this preventative and curative measure. For example, Ayurveda includes an extensive list of herbs that can be used for an assortment of treatments: "Ayurveda's materia medica is extensive, with more than 700 herbs described in detail in the ancient texts. The herbs and herbal mixtures utilized in Ayurveda are prepared by using the various parts of the plant".¹⁰ These herbs, however, play a slightly different role than spices do in the sense that they are one, not often used in traditional Indian food and two, are used for a more toxic purpose: "Herbs are sometimes used singly but more often in combination to provide synergistic effects and mitigate toxic side-effects. Ayurveda does not recommend isolating the active ingredient because toxic side effects can occur and the synergistic benefits are lost".¹⁰ Some of these include but are not limited to, *Asparagus racemosus*, *Sida cordifolia*, *Abutilon indicum*, and many more. As described by Sharma these herbs play a multipurpose role for the betterment of the human body: "The herb *Asparagus racemosus* Willd, promotes lactation in the postnatal period, *Sida cordifolia* Linn and *Abutilon indicum* encourage the growth of the baby".⁹ These benefits provided by both herbs and spices are examples of how Ayurveda, from ancient times, has focused on promoting public health measures in society.

Though health promotion and preventative health have been a central pillar in the development of Ayurveda, what exactly does health mean to this form of medicine? According to Moradani: "Ayurveda, the traditional medicine of India and first of all anthropological/traditional medical systems, emphasizes the necessity of a more person-centered, personalized approach in medicine. The process of healing has to be based on people's whole bio-psycho-spiritual unity and equilibrium, including their relation to the environment and the way they perceive or "narrate" their own complex individual existence, both in sickness and health."¹¹ As described above, health is heavily influenced by how in-sync with the surrounding environment both physical and spiritual as well.

With having a proper relationship with these factors not only does a person live a healthier lifestyle, but in

addition, they can easily heal from various diseases or injuries that they have contracted. Determinants in public health are extremely important when trying to analyze the incidence and prevalence of diseases in a community. For example, determinants such as sociodemographic status, genetics, behavior, environment, etc, play intertwining role in the status of health. Similar, in Ayurveda, there are determinants that are outlined that play an effective role in promoting and maintaining a proper health status in a community: "In Ayurveda the determinants of health are biological, ecological, medical, psychological, sociocultural, spiritual and metaphysical factors, all interdependent and wired together by the common concept of relationship. The harmonization and integration of these determinants in a complex system allow the emergence of what is identified as health."¹¹

Through these determinants, Ayurveda helps create an outline for establishing its foundation of health that in turn provides a baseline for health promotion development and care. In Ayurveda, as noted before, there is a different perspective on care: "Health for Ayurveda is not a constant state of well being, it is rather an ideal space around an ideal condition in which the physiology can float around, the bigger the space, the healthier the individual. The crossing of the boundaries of this space towards disorder is what is called diseased state, but the strength of an organism lies in the ability to return back to his overall ideal condition. The role of Ayurveda is to keep this space as wide as possible and to facilitate the return in case of a disease."¹² Being based around this concept of idealism, Ayurveda approaches preventative health with a multidimensional, promotive, and curative approach: "But Ayurveda is an even more complex scientific and philosophical model of reality which accounts for its multidimensional preventive, health promotive and curative approach, and can give a wider spectrum of possible interventions and possibilities" This universality of Ayurveda allows it to encompass treatments for a variety of diseases and infections. In addition, this variance allows Ayurveda to approach preventative health in a multifactorial way.

One of the ways we can see the universality of health is through Ayurveda concept of prevention in Public Health. Prevention of disease as described by Dr. Halpern is based on four important concepts. The first is dependent upon the early detection promoted by the

mainstream medical community. The second involves preventing the effects of stress from harming us. The third method involved purifying our bodies as a way to keep environmental poisons (pesticides, heavy metals, industrial, chemicals, hormones, etc.) from harming us. Fourthly, prevention involves looking at our lifestyle and recognizing how our choices about how we live and act are producing stress which is slowly killing us. Throughout health care schemes you can see these concepts in play when trying to tackle the spread of disease. For example, the process of routine mammograms women likely to get breast cancer is a process of early detection. In regards to the second concept, the promotion of meditation, daily exercise, micronutrient support, and vitamins have all been sources to help reduce stress.

The growth of herbal alternative such as this, has led to the expansion of organic health food and water purification industries. "In addition, many new products are on the market to help us remove toxins from our bodies. Most of these are herbal alternatives (blood and liver purifiers) and purgatives or laxatives to cleanse the colon. Panchakarma, the Ayurvedic science of purification, also addresses these toxins, as well as toxins created internally through the poor digestion of food."¹³ To address the fourth concept, reflection on one's habits and lifestyle can be a beneficial when trying to create positive environments. The idea of such a method is there not to necessarily reduce stress but finding ways to deal with it by learning the trigger factors in our daily lifestyle

Ayurveda's goal, unlike modern medicine, isn't necessarily to just treat but to also prevent it. This aligns with the ideals of public health which looks at the prevention and distribution of diseases within a community as whole: "In the area of disease prevention, Ayurveda teaches us that through a healthy lifestyle that is individually designed to be harmonious with our own unique nature (our constitution), and the practices of meditation and yoga, a person can reach their potential physically, emotionally and spiritually. In this state, the disease does not exist. It serves no purpose. For what is disease? It is our body communicating disharmony. Remove the disharmony, and you remove the disease". However what public health fails to address in preventative medicine Ayurveda answers. This is increasingly evident in the area of personalized

medicine. Personalized medicine in Ayurveda is addressed in swasthavritta, a concept which looks at the maintenance of positive health: "It is defined as a state of resistance through the defense activities of the human body against the disease. And this can be attained by getting proper nutrition, minimal exposure to pollutants, reducing stress in one's life (Shweta et al.). This concept was addressed thousands of years ago, something which modern medicine is now finally addressing. Swasthavritta is multifaceted, in the sense that it is an incorporation of many preventative factors. For example, the contents of Swasthavritta include: 1. Daily regimen (Dincharya), 2. Seasonal Regimen (Ritucharya), 3. Occupational duties, 4. Precautionary Observances in sexual activity, 5 General rules of conduct for the well being in society, 6. Preventive measures against untimely old age, 7. Conduct and practices of realization (Shweta et al.). Through this process, Ayurveda highlights on three critical aspects of preventative health which includes personal hygiene, rejuvenating and invigorating agents, and practice of yoga.

For personal hygiene, Ayurveda talks about physical, physiological, and spiritual harmony. There are many ways that this can be achieved. For example, when looking at oral hygiene, Ayurveda stress heavily on the inculcation of natural sources: "According to Ayurvedic texts, it is recommended that Datuna (Chewing Sticks) in the morning as well after every meal prevents oral disease. The method of use is to crush one end, chew it and brush with it slowly. It is better to take this from a fresh plant. The stems used for Dante Pavan should be healthy, soft, without leave and knots. After cleaning the teeth with Dattuna, it is torn in two part and used to scrape the tongue coatings." When talking about rejuvenation, Ayurveda utilizes the concept of panchakarma. A detox process, different than what most modern medicine is aimed at: "Panchakarma is unlike any other detoxification program; it is fundamentally designed to remove a different form of toxin. While many toxins exist in our environment which accumulates and harm our bodies, Ayurvedic Panchakarma addresses a special toxin called ama which is formed within our own bodies. When ama is cleansed, the body can then begin the process of rejuvenation. Almost like pressing a restart button on a phone, the body can not jumpstart with a fresh state of mind and body: "Dr. David Frawley, renowned Vedic scholar, says in his book Ayurveda

and the Mind: “Panchakarma is the main Ayurvedic method for physical purification. It is useful for physical problems caused by excesses of the three doshas. Yet it can also be helpful for psychological problems caused by internal factors, emotions, and karma. In addition, the practice of yoga can as well lead to the alleviation of psychological problems: The primary means of yoga is to balance the mind by removing its tendency to enter states causing imbalance through the qualities of triguna. In Ayurveda, the primary emphasis is on promoting health and preventing pathology and restoring health when a person’s bad habits and bad karma have compromised their state of health.”

Though Ayurveda might be considered an ancient form of medicine for many, it nevertheless, exemplifies medicine to its real purpose: Preventing disease. As modern medicine looks towards current treatment, Ayurveda looks beyond that scope by asking how can we prevent this from happening again? Based on this fundamental concept, Ayurveda has formed its practices and remedies tailored to that prevention. Because of this, Ayurveda has been one of the first examples of preventative medicine and therefore a gateway to public health care. Having a history of 5,000 years under its belt, Ayurveda didn’t merely come up with public health standards without any basis; instead, the concepts and standards outlined in Ayurveda have been a product of years and years of trial and error. Through this, the teachings in Ayurveda have been a guidebook and exemplification for modern medicine to look at and learn from.

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