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Editorial Musings: Some thoughts on alternative medicine

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I have been a data driven scientist for the process of decision making for some forty years as a member of the Physiology department in the College of Medicine at the University of Arizona. While on a hiking excursion in Sweden I slipped and fell. In an attempt to break my fall, I grabbed a railing the result of which was a sharp pull on my left shoulder joint (where the humerus articulates with the scapula). The pain was diagnosed by a physician as a rotator cuff injury. The suggested remedy to relieve the pain was surgery to reattach the muscle (supraspinatus) to the bone (head of the humerus). I do not doubt that the surgery had the potential to heal the injury, but full recovery time according to the physician would be six to eight months, much of the time with my left arm in a sling to decrease the pressure on the repaired joint. I did not opt for surgery as the tear of the tendon from the bone was about 4mm. Instead of surgery, I instead chose treatment by a physical therapist. Physical therapy reduced the pain somewhat but did not relive it entirely.

As an alternative to standard medical procedures my wife suggested non-medical interventions. In my case this meant acupuncture. Initially I was skeptical as I had no experience with this alternative medical procedure. Acupuncture in the United States does not have a long history whereas in Chinese medicine it has a very long history. The history of acupuncture dates back some 2500 years where it probably began with early Chinese medical practitioners. The practice has grown remarkably in the United States where it is used to ameliorate the discomforts of headaches, joint pain, nausea, and arthritis to name just a few human ailments.

In my case with the encouragement of my wife, I sought out the services of a well-known acupuncturist in an attempt to deal with the persistent shoulder pain caused by the rotator cuff injury. I was somewhat skeptical after the initial treatment session due to my background of making decisions based on hard evidence. But, one has to understand that in most cases using of acupuncture it takes several treatment sessions of to observe (feel) positive results.

To my surprise, with time and several treatments by the acupuncturist, I experienced (felt) marked improvement in the mobility of my left shoulder joint. Throughout the acupuncture sessions no pharmaceuticals were consumed. I believe it is important to allow the body to heal itself without the intervention of pharmaceutical agents.

The use of pharmaceutical agents can at times be counterproductive and can lead to side effects and other disorders although the agents are administered based on clinical trial evidence. The over-reliance on pharmaceuticals can create new conditions. The goal of preventing future disabilities and even prolonging life span with medicines can lead to new disorders in the present such as elevated blood pressure, elevated plasma cholesterol concentrations, and high blood pressure. Such disorders are based on an individual's clinical risk profile before the presence of the disease.

My recent experience with acupuncture has opened me up to the consideration of alternative procedures that may rely less on pharmaceutical agents and more on allowing the body to heal itself with the aid of proper nutrition and alternative interventions. It was a positive experience.

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