

The practice of humanistic healing: Physicians' journey through time

Bharti Bhandari^{1,2*} , Prerna Agarwal¹ , Shridhar Dwivedi¹ 

ABSTRACT

Humanistic healing is an integrative approach to health and wellness that prioritizes the individual's subjective experience and inherent potential for growth, aligning closely with the principles of humanistic psychology. This approach considers the interplay between physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects of health, aiming to restore balance and harmony. Indian culture has consistently valued and upheld the duty of helping those in need. Since ancient times, many renowned works in Sanskrit have emphasized the importance of benevolent acts. Keeping in line with the existing principles, since ancient times, the emphasis was not just on therapeutic care but on promotive and preventive health care as suggested by ancient Indian scriptures like Sushruta and Charak Samhita. In the past, communication skills, empathy, compassion, and preventive and holistic approaches to treatment have been reinforced during each era worldwide. One of the quotes of Sir William Osler's 'One of the first duties of the physician is to educate the masses not to take medicine' is more relevant in the current scenario where rampant use of medicine has become a norm. As per NMC, the Goal of UG Medical Education Program is to produce an "Indian Medical Graduate" (IMG) possessing requisite knowledge, skills, attitudes, values and responsiveness so that she or he may function appropriately and effectively as a physician of first contact of the community while being globally relevant. To fulfill this goal, the NMC has defined certain roles for the IMG -namely clinician, communicator, leader, member of a health care team, life-long learner and professional.

In this review, we have focussed on the humanistic qualities of a physician that existed in the past and are also evident in the present. It has also highlighted the importance of self-care and pursuing interest beyond medicine among physicians, along with the attributes a physician should possess in the current scenario.

Keywords: Humanistic healing, Holistic care, Physician wellness, Self-care.

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INTRODUCTION

Indian culture has always upheld the duty of helping the needy. Since time immemorial, numerous famous works in Sanskrit have highlighted the importance of act of benevolence. Vedvyas have expressed "*aṣṭādaśa purāṇeṣu vyāsasya vachanadvayam, paropakārah puṇyāya pāpāya parapīḍanām*" meaning to help others is sacred while to make others unhappy is like sin. Likewise, Tulsidas said "parhit saris dhram nahi bhai, parpeeda sum nahi adhmaayi", meaning there is no religion like doing good for others & there is no degeneracy (sin) like hurting others.¹ In the chapter, Dronaparva of Mahabharata, King Rantideva says "*Na Tvaham Kamaye Rajyam Na Swargam Na-punarbhavam. Kaamaye Dukha-Taptanam Praninam artinaashanam*" meaning "*I do not want any Kingdom, nor heaven nor even escape from rebirth. I do desire that the afflictions of all beings tormented by pain in life may cease*".² At any time, the foremost need of human beings is alleviation from diseases and sufferings and doctors. Physicians from ancient times have adopted the doctrine and worked for the betterment of the health of mankind.

Holistic Care in the Bygone Era

Maharishi Sushruta, known as the father of surgery (flourished c. 6th century BCE), was an ancient Indian surgeon recognized for spearheading surgeries and various surgical techniques, described in his influential treatise *Sushruta-samhita*. The *Sushrutaa Samhita* is among the most important ancient

¹Department of Physiology, Government Institute of Medical Sciences, Greater Noida, Uttar Pradesh, India.

²Department of Cardiology, National Heart Institute, New Delhi, India.

***Corresponding author:** Bharti Bhandari, Department of Physiology, Government Institute of Medical Sciences, Greater Noida, Uttar Pradesh, India, Email: drbhartibhandari@yahoo.co.in

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medical treatises and is one of the fundamental texts of the medical tradition in India, along with the Charak Samhita.³ For his contribution, it is no surprise that a prestigious and learned college like The Royal Australian College of Surgeons has given Sushruta such a place of honor in its temple of learning. The Sushruta Samhita is also an instruction manual for physicians to treat their patients holistically. It stated that an imbalance in the body caused a disease, and it was the physician's duty to help others maintain balance or to restore it if it had been lost.⁴ To Sushruta, health was not only a state of physical well-being but also mental, brought about and preserved by the maintenance of balanced humors, good nutrition, proper elimination of wastes, and a pleasant,

contented state of body and mind. This conforms to the modern definition of health given by WHO.

Maharishi Charaka was an ancient Indian physician and scholar who made significant contributions to the field of Ayurveda, an Indian traditional system of medicine. He is considered one of the principal contributors to the Charaka Samhita, the foundational texts of Ayurvedic medicine.⁵ According to Charaka Samhita, it is important to be aware of the traits of the correct drug and a knowledgeable physician, as these are the two important pillars of successful treatment. Charaka Samhita not only teaches the basic tenets of Ayurveda but also the underlying principles and practices for leading a long and healthy life. It states that it is the body and mind that houses diseases as well as pleasures.⁶ These scriptures are suggestive of the fact that the practice of holistic care existed even in ancient India. Emphasis was not just on therapeutic care but on promotive and preventive health care also.

Hippocrates (5th century B.C.), the father of modern medicine, lived about 2400 years ago. In the books authored by him, many diseases and their treatment have been described in a scientific manner, after detailed observation. The great physician believed in the healing power of nature and gave special emphasis to the prevention and prognosis of illnesses. He treated patients as psychosomatic entities (a holistic medical approach) in relation to their natural environment.⁷ In his treatises, Hippocrates defined the ethical principles guiding medical practice. Humanistic ideals and an undeviating dedication to the patient inspired his entire work. *"Cure sometimes, treat often, comfort always."* - Hippocrates had it right over two millennia ago. Another of his important aphorisms was: *"As to diseases, make a habit of two things - to help or at least to do no harm"*.⁸ From this saying, it can be said that even thousands of years ago, the physician followed the principles of clinical ethics - beneficence and non-maleficence.

These scriptures are suggestive of the fact that the practice of holistic care existed even in ancient India and in other parts of the world. Emphasis was not just on therapeutic care but on promotive and preventive health care also.

Physicians were advised to take care of themselves before taking care of their patients. Hippocrates Oath says *"I will attend to my own health, well-being, and abilities in order to provide care of the highest standard"*.⁹

Holistic Care in the Modern Era

We have examples of great physicians like Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy (1882-1962), who had fought for various social causes. He exhibited immense dedication and hard work and would serve as a nurse when necessary. Dr. BC Roy was a strong advocate for a comprehensive approach to medicine that considered not just the physical ailments of patients but also their mental and social well-being. His work in establishing medical institutions, promoting health education, and fostering a holistic view of patient care has had a lasting

impact on healthcare in India.¹⁰ To honour his contribution, his birthday is observed as "The Doctors' Day" every year. The celebration emphasizes the invaluable worth of doctors in society.

Sir Dr Robert Hutchison (1871-1960) proposed that all healthcare professionals, including practising physicians, should imbibe the humanistic aspect of medicine as a psalm.¹¹ Even with the advent of technology and machines that can increase efficiency and reduce errors significantly in healthcare, the role of human presence and the healing touch is irreplicable. Being compassionate and empathetic is the human connection that people look forward to in doctor-patient interaction.

Sir William Osler has said *"Listen to your patient - he is telling you the diagnosis."* He recognized the need for personalized medicine even at that time as he quoted, *"It is much more important to know what sort of a patient has a disease than what sort of a disease a patient has."*^{12,13}

The National Medical Commission (NMC) of India plays a crucial role in promoting holistic and humanistic care in the medical field. As per NMC, the Goal of UG Medical Education Program is to produce an "Indian Medical Graduate" (IMG) possessing requisite knowledge, skills, attitudes, values and responsiveness so that she or he may function appropriately and effectively as a physician of first contact of the community while being globally relevant. To fulfil this goal, the NMC has defined certain roles for the IMG - Clinician, communicator, leader, member of a health care team, life-long learner and professional.¹⁴ To enable the medical graduate to perform these roles, the relevant attributes of a physician can be identified as ten 'Cs'.

Cognitive and psychomotor ability

A physician must be an expert in his field with in-depth knowledge of the subject and good clinical skills. He should be up to date on all the latest trends and medical news.

Conscientious

A physician who does their duty well and thoroughly while upholding ethical principles of beneficence, non-maleficence, justice & autonomy.

Compassionate and caring

A physician who makes the patients feel cared for, makes them feel that their concerns are valid and that they are being heard. Empathy forms the foundation of medicine. Patients look up to doctors for psychological well-being and the best way to deliver this support is by conveying empathy. However, the physician should not become too emotionally involved in the patients' suffering so that by the end of the day, they are too exhausted and burnt out.

Curious

A curious physician to keep abreast with latest advancements in the field of medicine, thereby improving diagnostic accuracy and treatment. A doctor should be willing to

expand his/her knowledge and skills through training and the acquisition of new technologies and should be able to quickly develop methods and apply relevant information. Curiosity is the key to self-improvement.

Critical thinker

A physician should have the ability to conceptualize, apply, analyze and synthesize information during challenging situations to draw meaningful conclusions.

Culture sensitive and open-minded

The physician should be able to provide unbiased medical services to all patients irrespective of their ethnicity, culture, religion, gender etc.

Civic-minded

A physician should be interested in and care about what is going on in their community. They should ensure that the professional organizations to which they belong are focused on serving the interests of the public, rather than simply serving the interests of the organization's members. Volunteer efforts should specifically aim at improving the health of the public.

Collaborator

A physician who collaborates not only academically and professionally with colleagues but also with family members of a patient in decision-making, should be able to collaborate with community leaders to conduct health awareness programs or intersectoral coordination among other disciplines like engineering, lawmakers, etc.

Communicator

A physician should be a patient listener and a good speaker. Medicine is largely dependent on the communication of ideas, concepts and orders among colleagues and subordinates and incorrect information may lead to serious problems. A doctor should be skilled in not only verbal but also in non-verbal communication to yield clues from the patient's body language.

Community leader

As respected members of the community at large, as well as key members of the healthcare system, doctors have the opportunity to get involved and make a difference at any and all levels.

As quoted by ME Whicomb, "A physician who is not caring, inquisitive, and civic-minded may be a highly skilled technician involved in the practice of medicine; such an individual will not truly reflect the essence of what it means to be a physician."¹⁵

Physician and self-care

Recently, the COVID-19 pandemic brought out the importance of this profession. Due to their unselfish and dedicated service to society, the healthcare professionals, including doctors, were called corona warriors. The COVID-19 pandemic led to a loss of millions of lives. This phase also marked the death

of many young doctors, making all of us feel the importance of self care and attending to one's health before caring for others. The medical profession exposes doctors to high levels of stressful situations, predisposes them to early physical and mental burn out. There is a surge of reports of young doctors experiencing acute cardiovascular morbidity and mortality.¹⁶ It is the time to bring into practice the Hippocratic Oath "I will attend to my own health, well-being, and abilities in order to provide care of the highest standard".¹⁷

Physician and Interest beyond Medicine

Besides professional commitments, a physician needs to expand his realms to pursue their hobbies and interests. Every physician should have an 'interest beyond medicine' that may include sports activities, gardening, fine art, dance, music, literary writing and others. These activities help in dealing with stress and also add meaning to their profession. Showing respect to Mother Nature keeps oneself grounded. "Colleagues, I have no God, but I do have Saints, the eternal values of Medicine; Do good, be just, respect nature." by Per Fugelli.¹⁷ In Scotland, medical students receive a book of poetry intended to help them recharge and be mindful of the human aspect of their vocation.¹⁸

The Final Words

William Osler's expression, "The practice of medicine is an art, not a trade; a calling, not a business; a calling in which your heart will be exercised equally with your head," encompasses the essence of humanistic healing.¹⁹ Under the Indian Presidency, the G20 in 2023 focused on the theme, "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam," meaning "One Earth, One Family, One Future," inspired by the Maha Upanishad, an old Sanskrit scripture. The theme affirms the value of human, animal, plant, and microorganisms and their interconnectedness on planet Earth and in the wider universe.²⁰ Doctors of today have a crucial role in maintaining a healthy and prosperous world.

The perception of the society for a doctor may be different from what a physician perceives them to be. Society perceives a doctor as a healer, a teacher, a researcher, a reformer/crusader/health activist, one who indulges in hobbies-writing, reading, poetry, music, dance, sport, painting, has adequate knowledge of the Indian system/cultural heritage and contributor to the society. It is the time to fulfill society's expectations and see the brighter side of the profession, where self-care and enjoying one's life is as important as serving others selflessly in a compassionate, empathetic and ethical manner.

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