

A New Kind of Health Care: Sustainable Medicine

By ELIZABETH FERRY

Photography by JIM MAUCHLY

SUSTAINABLE: a method of use or harvesting so that the resource is not permanently diminished; to supply with sustenance or nourishment.

The concept of sustainability is on our collective and individual minds. We talk about sustainability in relation to our most fundamental human activities — sustainable agriculture to feed us, sustainable building materials to house us, and sustainable energy to warm or cool our living environments.

Health is another fundamental aspect of our existence. Consider combining the word “sustainable” with the concept of health and healing — a framework of health care that is in balance with the ecology that supports it.

Upper Valley homeopath and acupuncturist Didi Pershouse is engaged with the concept of sustainable medicine. Central to her work is the conviction that the health of the environment and health of the body are inextricably linked.

Pershouse, an alternative health care provider with 15 years of practice, is the founder of the Two Rivers Clinic in Thetford Center, Vt., and co-author of *Vital Expression: A Workbook on Homeopathic Casework*.

“When I came up with the concept of sustainable medicine in 2006, I wondered if I’d come up with something original,” says Pershouse, who has trained as a linguist, herbalist, acupuncturist and homeopath. An Internet search revealed a few alternative health practitioners who



Didi Pershouse (and therapy dog Phoebe) at Two Rivers Clinic.

are developing the concept in places such as California, Hungary and England. There is no single school, or school of thought, regarding sustainable medicine. It is a concept; the practice and definition of which is a work in progress.

“Sustainable medicine is health care that is sustainable for the planet, and economically and emotionally for people,” she says. “It’s not just ‘Do you have a cold today?’ but also ‘How healthy

is your system? How are your relationships? And how healthy is your planet?’ Because all of these things are interconnected.”

CONNECTED TO THE NATURAL WORLD

Sitting in a sunlit room on the second floor of the Two Rivers Clinic, Pershouse describes her career path. She grew up in an unconventional household in which turtles, snakes and iguanas

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were household pets — “the creepy-crawler the better,” she says. “From this I got the message that there was no such thing as a bad part of nature; everything was beloved and intriguing. This extends to my feelings about my patients. I work from a deep sense of love for all of them, no matter what they have done or not done in their lives.”

After graduating from college in 1986, she studied acupuncture and became a licensed practitioner of acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine in 1993. In 2000, her interests migrated to homeopathy. Homeopathy is based on the principle that “like (homeo) cures like.” The art of homeopathy is based in matching the energy pattern of the disease with an entity in nature that shares that same pattern.

Intense and careful listening is essential to Pershousé’s approach to homeopathy and provides clues to the remedy that can heal the patient. She schedules two to three hours for the initial intake. “I don’t try to comfort a client

out of their feelings,” she says. “I comfort them into the experience so that the energy pattern of disease can ripen and emerge.”

She offers this example: “I ask a client what’s bothering them, and they say, ‘migraines.’ Once I have the basic name, I start listening for factual details: ‘It starts every Thursday at 3 in the afternoon. It’s always on the right side. I’ve tried these medications.’”

Pershousé encourages the patient to go deeper, using images to describe the emotions that accompany the disease. She may hear comments such as “It’s incredibly frustrating” or “I can’t deal with it,” and descriptions such as “It’s as if my head is going to blow up” or “It’s like someone is stabbing me with a knife.”

LISTENING FOR CLUES

Sensations provide important data. She listens for words such as “there is pressure, something expanding in a tight space” or “It’s crushing, prickly and throbbing.” Hand gestures reflect the energy, intensity and direction of the affliction.

All of this is relevant data. Pershousé



has a number of reference tools to help her interpret it, including a computer program with a database of more than 600 volumes of cured cases, clinical data, homeopathic medical journals and research studies from around the world.

“Patients whose migraines are cured with mineral-based remedies are likely to use language that relates to minerals: heaviness, pressure, expansion, cracking and images such as being filled with soda water or crushed stone,” she says. Clients who will be cured by plant-based remedies often use words such as wilting, withering, twisting around or being cut or stepped on. Similarly, those who benefit from animal-based remedies, like bee venom or milk-based remedies, use victim-aggressor language that relates to animals. “I realize that at times they are actually describing the specific substance they need in detail. But usually they can’t hear it; to them, their description sounds like a jumble of sensations and odd images.”

This excites Pershousé on two levels. First, it facilitates accurate prescription; second, it implies a deep connection between humans and the world around them. Pershousé is part of a small, international group of homeopaths that are developing a new way of listening to patients, called the Sensation Method of homeopathy. Its practitioners make a fascinating observation: the language

The Homeopathic Approach

Samuel Hahnemann (1755-1843) is the founder of homeopathy. Upon graduating from a medical program in his native Germany, Hahnemann opened his first medical practice in 1779. Disillusioned by some of the common medical practices of the day, he developed an approach to curing disease that differed from his classical education.

Homeopathy uses a “whole person” approach. The mind, body and emotions are viewed as a single, integrate system, and all are considered when prescribing a remedy. Disease is understood as a disturbance to the patient’s life force.

Remedies are drawn from natural substances, which are diluted to minute amounts. They work via energetic pathways rather than the chemical pathways known in pharmaceutical medicines.

In the early 1900s, homeopathy was taught at medical schools, including Dartmouth, Harvard and Stanford. Twenty-two homeopathic medical schools and 100 homeopathic hospitals existed. However, not long after this, differences of practice and understanding created conflict between homeopaths and the American Medical Association. By 1950, homeopathy was almost unknown in this country. Interest has renewed in recent years. Today, most homeopaths practice with a medical license in another discipline, including medical doctors and nurses, naturopathic doctors, acupuncturists and more.

Homeopathy has a long tradition in Europe, especially in France, the United Kingdom and Germany. Legislation passed by the European Union in 1992 gave it official recognition in all member nations.

and gestures patients use in the process of explaining their disease reflect aspects of the natural substance that will heal them.

“We are intrinsically connected to the natural world that surrounds us,” Pershouse says. “My obsession with homeopathy comes not only from trying to help people, but seeing people and their remedies as lines of communication that, if connected, will help restore the web of life.”

A MANIFESTO OF SUSTAINABLE MEDICINE

In 2006, Pershouse started an online organization called The Center for Sustainable Medicine. Her goal is to bring together the best minds in the fields of ecology, medicine and sustainability to create a new model of health care. Central to her project is her Sustainable Medicine Manifesto, which states the philosophical foundation of her practice and vision. “It is an umbrella statement about an essential approach to healing,” she says — a synthesis of her experiences as a naturalist, healer, thinker and mother. The full manifesto is posted on her Web site, www.sustainablemedicine.net.

Pershouse considers the “costs” of health care, both to the environment and the patient. Sustainable medicine, in her definition, does not add to the toxic waste stream, creating further illness. Putting theory into practice, the clinic’s electricity is on CVPS Cow Power program. A neighbor is converting the heating system to biofuel.

Pershouse makes it her own practice to experience nature directly on a daily basis. This includes outdoor walks and having Phoebe, the therapy dog, as her clinic companion. “Having her greet patients at the clinic reminds us that it’s okay to cross the invisible boundaries — the boundaries that say we need to stay separate from nature, from wildness, from difference,” Pershouse says. “Phoebe’s presence tells people who are feeling distant that it’s okay to reconnect with the world. Reconnection with community, both natural and human, is an intrinsic part of health.” UVL



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