

Enlightened Health Care

by

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In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a change in western civilization occurred that is now referred to as "The Enlightenment." The change was an opening in a rigid system of privilege, authoritarianism, supernatural religion, and intense formality.

The change brought in freedom for individuals, the use of reason, the use of common sense, the study of empirical psychology, applied science, and sociology. Natural feelings, natural behavior, universal education, and equal rights were all promoted.

Adjectives describing the arts of "The Enlightenment" included the following: noble, pleasing, natural, elegant, animated, and universal. Music and writing of the period were to be created with clarity, good taste, and a sense of proportion. Expression with propriety was valued. All the senses were to be employed along with a reasoning mind to create sounds and written materials that made sense, fit into the natural world, and added to freedom and happiness while not being offensive.

Health care is in desperate need of an "Enlightenment." Health care labors under a system of managed money without much caring. The present system has failed to curtail costs, has resulted in sicker hospitalized patients, and continues to focus on expensive interventions rather than less costly prevention.

Currently only 2 percent of the American health care budget is spent on preventive efforts. A prime example of the failure to use adequate prevention can be seen with coronary heart disease. Among patients who have had heart attacks, angina pain, or procedures such as bypass surgery or angioplasty, only about 10 percent receive adequate treatment of their underlying vascular disease to prevent further clinical events or further procedures. This failure is in spite of years of adequate knowledge about how to stop and even reverse coronary disease!

Current health care erodes both patients and caregivers. It results in progressively impersonal patient experiences, caregiver alienation and burnout, and decreasing numbers of applicants for nursing and medical education. It is tool oriented, stressing pharmaceuticals and technology rather than human wellness. It seeks only bottom-line financial goals rather than true standards of human health.

Enlightened health care is wellness oriented rather than disease oriented. It addresses the physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, and tribal aspects of wellness. It seeks to enhance the natural healing abilities of each individual. It promotes the value of human interaction, of relationship as the center of medical caring. It creates hope rather than hopelessness and enthusiasm rather than frustration. It universally educates patients to their own abilities and allows them to put together prevention and treatment options that are individualized and that support rather than struggle with each person's inner voice of wisdom.

Enlightened health care facilitates the use of all useful tools for healing including belief, spiritual connection, complementary therapies, and effective lifestyle behaviors, as well as conventional allopathic technologies and pharmaceuticals. It looks at what is effective rather than just what lowers costs. It seeks evidence of safety and effectiveness in all therapies and defines caregiver competence in terms of relationship skills such as listening rather than just in terms of technical ability.

Enlightened health care invites patients and caregivers into a relationship of healing that is a mutual journey towards wellness. During the journey both parties are encouraged and enabled to grow, to learn, and to heal. Such a journey includes acceptance, respect, mindfulness, compassion, and humor.

Enlightened health care includes all cultures, respects all traditions and beliefs, and encourages all people to paint their own portraits of wellness. It offers an integrated set of tools and applies them all in the most humane fashion possible. It seeks to provide knowledge and treatment. It offers appropriate knowledge and tools starting at the earliest possible age and adds to the tools on a regular basis. It includes individual, institutional, community, and planetary wellness in its goals.

It is time for an "Enlightenment" in health care centered on a paradigm built around people rather than tools. It is time to stress and create incentives for prevention as well as intervention. We must allow the time and repetition necessary for healing. It is time to restore language such as clarity, elegance, good taste, common sense, and proportion to health care.

The "Enlightenment" in health care need not wait for government or insurance systems to change and evolve. It needs only for each of us, patients and caregivers, administrators and bankers, policy makers and regulators, to "be" what it is we want to see in health care. If we behave with respect, hope, mindfulness, reason, belief, invitation, encouragement, humor, acceptance, open-mindedness, and open-heartedness, we create Enlightened Health Care. Each of us sharing our expertise with compassion and love can do this work. We must do it! We must be it!