

Functional Medicine

Taking Medicine Beyond the Standard of Care

As I progressed through my training I became adept at listening to patients describe their symptoms. I was taught to categorize their symptoms in my mind, order appropriate tests and make a diagnosis. Symptoms that didn't fit into that diagnosis were either shrugged off or a second diagnosis was added. It is easy to treat patients in this model. One can simply do a literature search of the diagnosis, find the most up-to-date recommendations and apply them. After a few years in practice I was pretty good!

The problem was my patients weren't pretty good. Some of them were unable to find relief from the treatments I offered. Some found the side effects of treatment unbearable, worse than the original symptoms. Some just kept pestering with the question of WHY? Why do I have this disorder, is it genetic? Is it something I ate? Is it something I've done? Is there a way to make it go away? This is a question that many argue is academic – the why doesn't matter, you have it now let's deal with it.

A Functional approach to medicine provides opportunity to deal with these problems and to not only address the question of "Why?", but to attempt to modify it. Functional medicine looks at each individual as a genetically unique biological organism interacting with a set of environmental inputs (stress, diet, exercise, toxic exposures). A healthy person is one whose is able to competently interact with his/her environment while remaining in physiologic balance. When one is no longer able to stay in balance, a lack of health or lack of wellness develops. Often, this lack of wellness is perceived by an individual long before a "diagnosis" can be made in the standard medical sense. The modern standard of care is to treat diagnoses, not patients, and does not include a mandate to look at the underlying imbalances which caused the disease to manifest.

Functional medicine looks at each imbalance with regard to antecedents, triggers and mediators. *Antecedents* are those things that have set one up to develop an imbalance. These can include genetic, familial or environmental factors. *Triggers* are events which cause an imbalance – these can be as obvious as a car accident or infectious illness or as insidious as chronic exposure to toxins or allergens in our environment. *Mediators* are those things which allow an imbalance to continue or worsen. Some obvious example would be weight bearing on a fractured leg preventing it from healing properly or a person with diabetes continuing to eat a diet high in refined carbohydrates. Less obvious examples would be continuing to eat foods which cause a low grade allergic response or failing to replenish micronutrients which are lacking from one's diet.

The functional approach is not a cure-all nor is an easily applied snake oil. It requires serious detective work on the part of both the patient and the physician. Therapeutic intervention often involves significant lifestyle modification and results are often obtained slowly. As with standard of care medicine, mediation rather than cure of symptoms is sometimes all that is possible. For those who want to know not only *what* but also *why*, *how*, and *what can be done*, functional medicine is sane approach to both restore and preserve optimum health.