

Your body, your ecosystem - Common Ground

by [Kristin McCahon](#)



• When we visit our doctor with problematic symptoms, the physician will often write us a prescription or sometimes suggest surgery or a particular therapy. This isn't to say the doctor hasn't diagnosed the underlying problem. Physicians know perfectly well that back pain can indicate a tumour and limb numbness can be a sign of ALS or MS.

Once a diagnosis has been reached, most doctors will follow a standard course of treatment determined to be the most effective for that condition. It will be based on clinical trials and observations of people with the same diagnosis and set of symptoms. There may be some adjustment to the treatment regimen depending on the seriousness of the symptoms or the stage of the disease, but the treatment is still, more or less, one-size-fits-all.

Unfortunately, particularly as we age, the acute care model is not always successful at treating chronic illnesses because these diseases are complicated, deep-rooted and many faceted.

The search for treatment solutions and the deep-seated desire to return to good health has led many people to try TCM (traditional Chinese medicine). TCM has the advantage of having thousands of years of experimentation and knowledge behind it. It is also appealing because its practitioners try to determine why the illness has surfaced at all so it begins to provide answers to some of the "Why me? Why now?" questions we all have. TCM is also attractive because the treatments are often not pharmaceutical; they may involve a mix of selected herbal therapies, acupuncture, massage and meditation.

While TCM offers symptom relief for many people, we are also left wondering how scientific it is and if it really works. A possible answer lies in an emerging field of study: the microbiome – the name for the vast colonies of microbes that live in the human body. Scientists have begun to study the role of the microbiome and its influence in the immune system. Their research is proving that this collection of bacteria, which outnumber our own human cells at a ratio of 10 to 1, is associated with many of the chronic illnesses we wrestle with, including obesity, heart disease, diabetes, asthma and some cancers. According to the American Microbiome Institute (www.microbiomeinstitute.org), research has shown a "direct relationship between diet and the abundance of

certain gut microbial communities” and “some scientists speculate that the gut microbiome may cause cravings for certain foods and influence dietary choices.” Their findings go some way in explaining why some of the herbal therapies that TCM prescribes appear to be effective.

Another approach to chronic illness may also find its mechanism within the microbiome. With its focus on nutrition, functional medicine is a relatively new medical methodology that holds allure for those seeking science-based medicine that is also holistic. Dr. Jeffrey Bland, founder of the Institute for Functional Medicine has pioneered this approach in the US. Functional Medicine does not simply take the “lifestyle” approach common to some alternative therapies. It looks for the underlying cause of illness. It is rooted in science and, as Catherine Guthrie notes in her comprehensive article, “Functional Medicine: A Science Whose Time has Come,” considers the patient’s “biochemistry, physiology, genetics and environmental exposures... when looking for the cause of a specific medical issue or set of symptoms.”

Before treatment begins, the practitioner spends a long time with each patient, trying to determine the exact cause of their symptoms. The practitioner will ask detailed questions about diet, previous illnesses – including those from childhood – lifestyle and anything that might be causing stress. The practitioner may also order tests – standard and more specialized lab tests – and do a physical exam.

In an episode of *House Call: Finding the Cure for Chronic Disease*, Dr. Mark Hyman explains it this way: when a patient goes to the doctor and complains of tiredness, poor concentration, lack of energy and the inability to care much about the outside world, they are often diagnosed with depression. But that is just the name for a cluster of symptoms. There are a whole host of disparate, underlying problems that can create the cluster of symptoms called depression.

Though each of these underlying causes should be treated differently, it is common medical practice to treat the symptoms with a standard treatment protocol. In his book, *The Disease Delusion*, Dr. Bland notes, “The diseases and conditions we call chronic derive from a variety of causes... and because the drugs for the illnesses treat only the dominant symptoms... you don’t really get over a chronic illness... Instead, it either persists or recurs; in fact, it actually gets worse over time.” “Pelting” the symptoms with different drugs, as Dr. Bland puts it, won’t fix the underlying problem.

This is where the functional medicine approach comes in. The treatment regimen will usually involve making changes to the patient’s lifestyle and can include a combination of traditional pharmaceuticals and vitamins, along with complementary, supportive therapies, such as stress reduction techniques, exercise and a special diet. Functional medicine treats the body like an ecosystem; it looks for the root causes of health problems and doesn’t just focus on the symptoms. It then works to address those underlying causes and thus create in each patient a healthy system.

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