Energy Medicine: A Hidden Dimension of Health and Healing

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The umbrella of integrative medicine is large and inclusive, with a great variety of good science and sound clinical practice to back it up. As the field matures, doubts have subsided about many practices, especially those considered mind/body in focus such as biofeedback, meditation, and hypnosis. However, another group of novel therapies is governed by the gravitational skepticism, largely because they are so difficult to explain. For example, homeopathy's infinitesimal dilutions, Therapeutic Touch's lack of actual physical contact, and even acupuncture's invisible points. How can these therapies possibly work? What is the nature of the so-called subtle energy that their practitioners actually refer to? These are questions that concern the specialized branch of integrative medicine known as Energy Medicine.

The concept of subtle energy itself, the common pathway of many of these unusual therapies, is basic to almost all the healing traditions. Yoga has its prana, tradition of the body has its qi, and Jewish mysticism has its ruach.

Aside from such diverse theories as Franz Mesmer's Animal Magnetism and Wilhelm Reich's orgone, Western allopathic medicine has shied away from vitalistic theories of dynamic balance, of energy flows and blockages. We have assumed that health and illness can be understood by breaking down the machine of the human body into its component parts, and then finding and replacing the broken bits. There is no real notion of anything we can do to change the process or function; homeostasis, we suppose, happens accidentally, if at all.

But other cultures have devoted as much time and energy to exploring the realm of subtle body energies as we have to our high tech interventions and synthetic pharmaceuticals. In some ways their results are just as impressive as ours. For example, our traditional map of the human body is studied in gross and microscopic anatomy—organs, tissues, and cells. Practitioners of the various branches of energy medicine have created a parallel discipline called subtle anatomy, whose components must be dissected via introspection if the physiology of energy dynamics is to be understood. The main components of this human, subtle energy matrix include the following: (1) the overall storage vessel (the energy field, or aura); (2) the distribution pathways (more familiarly known as the acupuncture meridians); and (3) the transformers, which modulate the quality of this universal life energy (the chakras, or energy centers).

As we take a closer look at this subtle anatomy and its attendant physiology, arcane techniques of energy medicine make some sense. Each energy component has both a clinical applications in energy medicine, as well as an everyday life experience.

The Energy Field

The overall container of the energy field is the part of humans that extends beyond the skin. Using sophisticated magnetometers, it is now possible to measure the extent of the energy electromagnetic field. Studies have shown that we have a certain intrinsic, and altered states of consciousness can create dramatic fluctuations in these fields; surges in the body's electrical potential ranging from 4 to 190 volts have been recorded in energy healing meditations (Green). In everyday life, we experience this bounded field as our sense of personal space—when we recoil at someone's intrusion, we feel his energy impinging upon our personal electromagnetic domain.

Therapeutically, the energy medicine practitioners that are especially focused on this component is Therapeutic Touch. Developed by the nurse Delores Krieger over 30 years ago, this technique involves no physical contact between nurse healer and patient, only hand movements 6 to 12 inches from the surface of the patient's body. The nurse will initially assess the quality of the energy field for imbalances, and then smooth out these irregularities. Research on this widespread modality (over 10,000 RN's in America have been trained) is spotty, with only the two known studies being controversial and possibly invalid. A schoolgirl's attempt to show that energy field detection is not reliable was published in JAMA (and publicized in People magazine), despite crucial pathological flaws (Rosa). An earlier study which seemed to show that TT facilitated weight loss has since been adequately replicated (Wirth).

The Distribution Pathways

These are the meridians and acupuncture points. Not simply random points on the skin assigned by superstitious Chinese priests (as my medical school anatomy professor maintained), classic acupuncture points have been shown to be specific locations which are characterized by markedly diminished electrical resistance (Young). In addition, they are particularly sensitive to light, and can be stimulated by light-sensitive radio Shack ohm meters.

Interestingly, Western medicine has evolved a parallel notion with its recent discovery of myofascial trigger points, specific locations that are electrically activated in the syndrome of myofascial pain disorder, and which often correspond in location to classical acupuncture points.

So, when a physician performs so-called dry needling to deactivate these points, he or she is essentially performing Western versions of acupuncture. And when we rub our temples or the bridge of our nose to alleviate a tension headache, we're unconsciously finding and stimulating several of these energy points.