



SYMBIOSIS

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Healing Without Harm: Ecologically Sustainable Medicine

AN INTERVIEW WITH EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR JOEL KREISBERG, DC, CCH

BY THE EDITOR, BEGABATI LENNIHAN

Q: What do you mean by Ecologically Sustainable Medicine?

JK: Ecologically Sustainable Medicine gives you greater health and well-being while promoting the health and vitality of your family, your community and the global ecosystem. Imagine having a debilitating illness such as asthma, colitis or arthritis. You go to the doctor and receive a treatment that is safe, harmless, non-polluting, and cost-effective. This treatment works by catalyzing your own healing abilities in a natural way, using techniques and substances that promote both personal and ecological health. Since human health and planetary well-being are synergistic—and this is a central idea—your healing process is deeply connected to the health of the world we live in. For example, if we use medicines that are renewable, they are also protective of natural resources and, ultimately, of the quality of life on earth. What's best of all, we have these techniques already.

Q: What kinds of healing are included in Ecologically Sustainable Medicine?

JK: Many forms of complementary and alternative medicine [CAM] fit the definition [see page 21]. Osteopathy is probably the most mainstream form of ESM in this country. Here I'm thinking of osteopathy which involves physical manipulation with the hands, not the kind in which the osteopath prescribes drugs like an MD. Osteopathy, which restores tissue function, is not resource-dependent; it uses the osteopath's hands for healing.

Osteopathy is not just a physical intervention. It is energetic, and like other forms of healing, it uses the energy of the patient as well as the healer to create a positive outcome. In this example, nothing is used up—even the healer's energy—because when energetic forms of healing are performed correctly, healers feel an increase of energy flowing through them.

Chiropractic is probably the second most common form of ESM. It's similar to osteopathy except chiropractic focuses on the spine and nerves, because of the belief that the spinal chord dictates the health of the rest of the system. Both chiropractic and osteopathy are vitalistic, meaning that they see the body as the physical expression of an inner spiritual reality. These forms focus on restoring the balance of 'vital' healing energy within the person.

Then there's acupuncture, which is oriented towards balancing energy pathways called the meridian system. It doesn't take much energy from the healer; in fact, the acupuncturist inserts the needles and leaves the patient alone for the body's own healing energy to do the work. The needles can be recycled with sterilization.

Homeopathy is perhaps the most ecologically sustainable medicine. The process of making homeopathic remedies, by diluting and shaking them hundreds, even thousands of times, means that a tiny amount of the original substance can be transformed into enough medicine for the whole of the planet.

For example, to make the remedy *Cuprum metallicum*, only a gram of copper is needed—an amount smaller than a penny. By the time it is ground with 100 times as much lactose, and the operation is repeated dozens of times, enough of the remedy has been produced for millions of doses. Homeopathy is an ideal way to use nearly-extinct herbs from the rainforest, for example.

Q: Are there other forms of ESM out there?

JK: Yes. Bodywork like massage, Shiatsu, acupressure, and craniosacral; energy healing like Reiki and polarity; yoga, Tai Chi, martial arts; meditation and prayer . . . Larry Dossey cites a famous study on prayer showing that when people prayed for heart surgery patients whom they didn't even know, the patients recovered faster, and needed fewer painkillers afterwards. He remarked that if a drug were discovered that yielded the same results, every hospital in America would adopt it immediately.

Q: Why is ESM important right now?

JK: We first need to look at how conventional medicine is harmful to the environment. There are two primary aspects to this problem: the harmful production process of many medicines, and the often extremely toxic waste stream produced as an output of conventional medicine. Let's take a look at both sides of the problem.

Sixty percent of conventional drugs are produced from petrochemicals. The process of drilling for oil and transporting it globally can wreak horrendous environmental damage. Many other drugs use non-renewable natural resources as a primary ingredient. Taxol is a great example. Until it was synthesized from pine needles, six yew trees had to be killed to produce enough taxol for a single woman with breast cancer.¹ Today, so many Pacific yews have been killed for taxol production that they are almost extinct.

Still other drugs are produced from animals in inhumane ways, like Premarin (which stands for 'PREgnant MAREs' urINe), an estrogen replacement used by more than 9 million post-menopausal women in the US alone.² The mares are confined in small stalls and kept perpetually pregnant.

Another significant aspect of drug production is the testing phase. Today, all drugs are tested on animals. Perhaps the worst example of this was in the development of the polio vaccine, for which 2 million rhesus monkeys were killed. We have since learned that the kidneys of the monkeys used in these tests may have been contaminated with all sorts of viruses that have now been spread by use of the vaccine.³

After drugs are used, they are generally flushed into the sewage system. Some of them, of course, pass through bodies first—either ours or those of farm animals. Many of these drugs are still viable and continue to effect the biota throughout the planet.

Vast quantities of antibiotics used in this country end up in the manure of farm animals that are routinely given antibiotics to prevent infectious illness and to fatten them for slaughter. The runoff from this manure carries huge amounts of antibiotics into our rivers. Antibiotics used in fish farming end up in public waterways. When antibiotic-resistant bacteria are bred in our bodies, or in our livestock, they end up in the sewage system and then in our lakes and rivers. These resistant bacteria pass along their resistance to other species of bacteria, with potentially destructive effects on the ecosystem. (See "Sex, Symbiosis, and Antibiotics," p. 8.)

Then there is the problem of waste from medical testing and equipment, like radioactive waste, which takes many lifetimes to break down and is difficult to dispose of safely. IV bags are made from PVC, which causes toxic fumes when burned. Tons of potentially infected syringes, scalpels, and

The Elements of Ecologically Sustainable Medicine (ESM)

- Safe and harmless
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- Clean and non-toxic
-
- Cost-effective
-
- Non-polluting
-
- Adaptable and flexible
-
- Renewable, because human energy is the primary fuel
-
- Protective of the quality of life on earth, of the environment and of earth's natural resources
-
- Synergistic with human health and planetary well-being
-
- Increases our connection with the web of life.





ESM gives you greater health and well-being while promoting the health and utility of your family, your community and the global ecosystem.

other surgical instruments are thrown away after a single use. You've probably heard the stories of syringes from hospital waste washing up on public beaches in New Jersey. Of course this medical trash is potentially harmful for humans, but it is also damaging the ocean environment as well.

Q: But don't we have to use those items for surgery? And isn't it safer to dispose of them after a single use?

JK: Yes, but let's look at the bigger picture: how much surgery performed in this country is really necessary? Western European countries have lower rates of many common surgeries. Are we really giving other methods of healing a chance first?

Q: Do any conventional forms of medicine qualify as ESM?

JK: Absolutely. Physical therapy, biofeedback, stress management, exercise and nutrition all qualify. Psychotherapy too, especially wilderness therapy and ecopsychology.

Q: I notice you didn't mention herbal medicine. Why is that?

JK: Herbal medicine is tricky because it depends on how the herbs are harvested. When the multinational pharmaceutical companies get involved, they can devastate an ecosystem in the quest for profits. There is a big movement now among the giant pharmaceutical companies to locate and patent herbal remedies from China and the Amazon. Holistic herbalists usually understand about harvesting herbs sustainably so they do not become extinct. They follow the example of the Native American herbalists who were respectful of the plants, always leaving enough to regenerate growth for the following year. Rosemary Gladstar's work with United Plant Savers promotes a way for herbalists to become actively involved with

the environmental movement out of a concern for vanishing herbal species.

Q: Can you give us an example of how healing modalities can actually help the planet?

JK: Homeopathy is a great example, because nearly every homeopathic remedy is made from a natural substance. Before they are used for patients, the remedies are put through a process called "proving" in which healthy people take a dose of the remedy and observe their own reactions in terms of their moods, energy and dreams as well as physical symptoms. In the process, many people feel they are tuning in to the consciousness of the plant or animal which the remedy was made from. It helps us to feel connected to the great web of life on this planet and grateful to the creatures which can each offer us a different type of healing energy. Flower essences do the same thing: each flower has a certain signature or gesture which can be healing for a particular emotional state.

Q: Won't ESM be more expensive than conventional medicine?

JK: Actually it will save a lot of money. Preventive medicine is certainly a form of ESM, like using diet, exercise and other lifestyle changes to help prevent cancer or heart disease. Think of what it costs, for example, to treat a child for repeated ear infections and then do surgery to put tubes in the child's ears. Let's say it costs \$10,000. Why not provide \$1000 for treatment with homeopathy, chiropractic or acupuncture, and then if these modalities don't work, go ahead with the surgery. If half the surgeries were avoided, we would come out ahead financially, and we would have all these children who would be physically healthier overall and not traumatized by surgery.

In countries with socialized medicine, CAM modalities are often included in the national health care system, because they are cost-effective. Profit-making medical practices tend to be more wasteful.

Q: What other efforts are being made in this field?

JK: Other people have been doing work along these lines for several years now, like Kenny Ausubel, founder of Bioneers, who is promoting Ecological Medicine.

Carolyn Raffensberger’s ecological think-tank Science and Environmental Health Network promotes a policy known as the ‘precautionary principle’: for new drugs (and other chemicals) to get approval, first they should be proven safe for the environment.

A pioneer organization tackling aspects of this issue is Health Care Without Harm (HCWH), which has been working for about five years to promote ethical standards for hospitals and health care companies, such as not using mercury blood pressure cuffs and thermometers. HCHW is also developing alternatives to incineration for the two million tons of medical waste which hospitals generate each year. All of these organizations have a role to play.

Q: What’s the difference between their work and yours?

JK: These organizations are doing a great job of trying to modify the conventional medical system to be more ecologically sound. They are saying, given that we need drugs and hospitals, how can we reduce the impact on the environment? I’m trying to open up the question a bit wider. Instead of just looking at the waste generated by medicine, let’s also focus on how the medicines are made and the selection of treatments impacts our ecological health. Do they pollute, or deplete precious resources, or make species extinct? And do we really need

all these drugs and surgeries, or can we use other forms of healing that are gentler on the environment—even positive for the planet?

Q: What is your bottom line about Ecologically Sustainable Medicine?

JK: I see an enormous potential for balancing our relationship with the environment through the development and use of Ecologically Sustainable Medicine. Michael Lerner, founder of Commonweal and The Collaborative on Health and the Environment, discusses the idea of a teachable moment. He feels that as a culture we are in a teachable moment as we have come to understand the negative effects of toxic waste on our health and the health of our planet.

Similarly, I believe that personal illness affords a teachable moment. By making a healthy choice as to what type of medicines we use and what we put in our body, we can have a profound impact on the environment. By using ESM we produce little waste while supporting a healthy balance between humans and the environment. The environmental potential is amazing, and we already have the technology available.

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- 1 Ohio State University Research Bulletin 150-99 http://ohioline.osu.edu/sc150/sc150__1.html
- 2 Buhner, S.H.(2002) *The Lost Language of Plants*. White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing (See review on page 22).
- 3 <http://www.premarin.org/>

RESOURCES

- Ecologically Sustainable Medicine: www.teleosis.org
- Health Care Without Harm: www.noharm.org
- Science and Environmental Health Network: www.sehn.org
- United Plant Savers: www.unitedplantsavers.org



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