



Physis - Our inner doctor

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Background

There are a number of important differences between natural and conventional medicine. Not only do the two have differing views on the cause of diseases, but also on the way they should be treated. Much of this is linked to their contrasting notions of the way the body operates. Another difference is their acceptance (or not) of the concept of inner, or self, healing. How much involved is the body in its response to disease? Is it an active player, or a passive observer? Natural medicine, to which Tibb belongs, accepts the principle that healing comes from within, and that medical care should aim to support, protect and boost this 'inner doctor'. In Tibb, this power is called *Physis*. Conventional medicine, on the other hand, favours the idea that maintaining health and treating disease is best achieved by intervention from outside, with the patient merely a carrier of the ailment. Self-healing as such is ignored or rejected as being non-scientific or old-fashioned.

Differing views on self-healing

Until about 150 years ago, virtually *all* medicine was considered natural. The existence of *Physis* was well-recognised, and its power in dealing with disease accepted without question. When treating a patient, the healer

Conventional medicine resulted from increased levels of scientific knowledge, chemical expertise and technological invention which coincided with the Industrial Revolution.

sought ways of supporting and boosting *Physis*. By doing so, the patient was helped in his or her recovery, and strengthened in avoiding similar illnesses in the future.

Tibb, as with other natural medicine systems, sees good health as the normal, natural state of the body. It results from a harmonious balance between (a) a person's nature, or constitution (b) the physical and emotional environment he or she lives in, and (c) the general lifestyle, or behaviour, adopted.

This harmony – *homeostasis* – is governed and regulated by *Physis*. One of its major roles is directing our bodies' many healing processes to keep us in good health, activating and supporting them when we succumb to a disease, and helping us convalesce. It ensures that all the living cells in our bodies, the tissues they form, and the internal organs function properly.

Conventional medicine has a different view of health and disease. It holds that disease arises as a consequence of

Homeostasis is the body's ability to remain in balance and harmony, despite internal or external stresses. It is maintained by the immune, endocrine and nervous systems.

(a) our bodies being invaded by alien microbes – parasites, bacteria, fungi, viruses or prions; (b) metabolic disturbances within the body; (c) genetic aberrations; (d) structural changes to tissues and organs. The emphasis in treatment is therefore based on

attacking and neutralising the invaders, or redressing the metabolic disturbances, or compensating for the genetic aberrations, or reversing the structural changes. In most cases this involves the extensive use of pharmacological agents, or drugs, which are often synthetic, new-to-nature chemicals or derivatives of substances derived from plants or fungi.

In Tibb, the condition of the person's internal environment, or terrain, is more important than the infecting organism. The pathogen is but one component of the environment; the susceptibility of the person to infection is more important than the germ. This means that we should focus on enhancing the body's own defences, rather than mounting an attack on the alien microbe. If this fails, because Physis is weak, or is overwhelmed by an alien microbe, then measures to reduce the number of pathogens can be considered.

In conventional medicine, the body has at different times been compared to a 'bag of enzymes', or to a machine made of meat, or to a clockwork mechanism, or to a computer, with parts which can be changed or modified to ensure smooth, efficient operation. From the Tibb perspective, this is grossly simplistic. As we learn more and more about the workings of the body, we realise how infinitely and exquisitely complex it is in its structure and organisation, and how little we know, for instance, of its intrinsic workings, and the nature of our awareness and consciousness. The activities of its astonishing self-protection systems, its integration with time and the environment, and especially of its self-healing potential still largely elude us. Physis not only has a physical dimension, but also emotional and spiritual ones too, which act together holistically to achieve optimum health.

In fact, the complexity is probably so vast that we are probably incapable of grasping its intricacies. For example, in one single living cell there are around 300,000 (that we know of) metabolic reactions *per second*. Each of these reactions is tightly organised in time and space, supplied by energy systems, precursor substances, delivery operations, and a whole host of interacting metabolic sequences. Each reaction has also to occur in the correct sequence, the designated space and at the right time, and be turned on and off as needed. This breathtaking complexity is not chaotic, but is controlled by the governor of the body: Physis.

The meaning of Physis

Physis is also known as our *Life Force*. It has been described as our vital spark, and the governing principle of our existence. It is an age-old concept, with a history going back millennia, embodied in many forms of natural medicine. It operates not only in our own bodies, but in all living creatures. It is the healing power of Nature, inborn from the

Nature heals, and the physician is only Nature's assistant."

[Hippocrates]

moment of our conception, and lasts until our last breath.

It is not a force which is open to direct experience. It does not reside as a discrete entity or structure within the body. It cannot be extracted, purified or stored. It exists as a construct which organises and controls all aspects of daily existence. It is only evident through its effects and qualities, especially the ability to keep the body in dynamic equilibrium or homeostasis. In many ways it is akin to consciousness in psychology, complex numbers in mathematics, and maybe electricity in physics: it cannot be analysed, but its effects are evident.

From a non-physical perspective, Physis is the basic intelligence of our health and vitality, managing our ability to reinforce good health and ward off disease. It is what distinguishes living flesh and blood from a corpse. In practical terms, Physis is a force for good, which should be encouraged and supported for optimal health, and insulated from

Physis operates in all dimensions of health: at the physical, the emotional, the spiritual, and even the social levels.

outside influences which can over-ride it, weaken it, or render it ineffectual.

Physis as a concept explains a number of natural healing phenomena which have so far eluded conventional medicine. For instance, it can explain *spontaneous healing*; the unexpected recovery from serious disorders considered untreatable by conventional medicine, such as aggressive cancers and crippling injuries. It also offers a reasonable interpretation of the *placebo effect*. It also explains why children recover much quicker from most ailments than do adults; why certain people fall victim to particular illnesses, but not others; and why some people recovery unexpectedly faster than do their fellow patients.

The concept of inner harmony was revived by the great scientist, Claude Bernard, in the 19th Century. He considered that harmony in the inner environment (*'milieu interieur'*) was needed for living processes to operate. The living body, he thought, can operate relatively independently of the outside environment, as it is protected by many mechanisms which adjust and regulate the inner environment. This later led to the term homeostasis. The concept was supported by another French scientist, Le Chatelier. Briefly, he considered that all complex systems (like living tissue) tend towards dynamic equilibrium. Any changes to this equilibrium, or homeostasis, are opposed by internal reactions which restore a new equilibrium.

Examples of Physis in action

Toxin removal

The human body is very well equipped to deal with the many natural and man-made toxic substances it comes into contact with via the skin, gut and lungs. There are very efficient mechanisms which makes the toxins more soluble, so that they can be excreted rapidly in the urine. There are also mechanisms which direct the toxins to the skin, or lungs, or gut for rapid removal in sweat, expired air or faeces. Drugs are a relatively new form of toxin, as most of them are alien chemicals, not previously experienced by the body. These too are rapidly removed from the body. If not, detrimental side effects and metabolic changes would develop. All these processes are under the control of Physis.

Protein folding

Proteins are major building blocks for cells and tissues. They make up enzymes, some hormones, and certain cell structures. Physically they are made up of a long chain of different amino acid links, like a long string of different pearls. When synthesised in the cell, they are inactive, and need to fold into a specific three-dimensional shape to work properly. If they fail to do this, the protein is inactive, or toxic, and may lead to disease. Many allergies are caused by incorrect folding of some proteins. Also, degenerative disorders like Alzheimer's and Parkinson's diseases are thought to result from improper folding. Protein folding is therefore a critically important function of protein shaping, or conformation. It has to be right every time, and for each of the millions of proteins being continually synthesised. The chances of this being achieved randomly are billions to one. Some force must be operating to ensure this is done perfectly at all times. This is where Physis comes in.

Weight maintenance

Most weight loss diets are a failure, as many know only too well. More than 95% of actual weight lost through diets returns within 5 years. One reason is that Physis becomes confused by severe food restriction, and switches the body to 'starvation mode'. When food supply is resumed, after the diet is abandoned, nutrients are rapidly and selectively stored in case of another 'famine' as Physis views it. Body mass increases as a survival mechanism. Another reason is that toxins from the environment and in some foods are stored in fatty tissue over the years, and when weight loss through dieting or exercise occurs, these 'obesogens' disturb the body's homeostasis. This interferes with Physis in its weight control activities, so body mass increases despite normal diet and physical activity.

Cellular repair in cancer

Cancer cells appear regularly in our bodies, due to the effects of toxins and natural radiation on our genetic material, or DNA. However, Physis is quite capable of eliminating these as soon as they appear, via the immune system. A major agent of the removal is 'Protein P53', a tumour suppressor protein. This interesting substance is tireless in removing new cancer cells. It is also involved in signalling when cells must die, a process known as apoptosis. It has been dubbed the 'guardian of the genome', because it maintains stability by protecting genetic material from damage.

Reaction to pathogenic microbes

We are all familiar with our bodies' reactions to pathogenic microbes. Nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea are the common and predictable body's responses. The viruses responsible for colds and flu also trigger a robust reaction – runny nose, coughing, sneezing, headache, etc. Also, if we inhale or come into contact with a substance we are allergic to, then the body's response is also typical. Narrowing of the airways, increased mucus production, and coughing are some of the body's reactions. These are all protective and survival responses, there to prevent further exposure to what the body considers a threatening substance. This complex protective shield employed by the body is under the control of Physis, which uses the immune system and inflammatory processes as its agent.

The various systems in the body – circulatory, respiratory, digestion, communication and immune systems, etc. – have their own internal organisation. However, they do not work in complete isolation; they have to be connected to each other for the sake of homeostasis within the body, and in order to function properly. Each is aware of the activities and problems faced by the others. In our bodies, Physis has the innate ability to orchestrate all these interconnected systems.

Physis and disease

Probably every chronic disease has aspects to it that result from disturbed Physis. As we age, or adopt a poor lifestyle, or are exposed to a toxic environment, imbalances in homeostasis begin to appear deeper and frequently. Physis begins to deteriorate inexorably, and inner harmony is under constant threat. This increases the risk of developing a disease, or bringing on the physical and mental changes linked to ageing.

Chronic diseases linked to a failing Physis include cancer, diabetes, hypoglycaemia, gout, and a number of disorders linked to dehydration. The accumulation of either internal or external toxins due to a less-effective Physis can also lead insidiously to certain chronic inflammatory diseases.

Therapeutic measures, such as those advocated by Tibb, are therefore necessary to restore harmony by supporting Physis. Otherwise, permanent damage to the structures, both at the cell and the whole body levels will occur. They may be linked to a better diet, or adjustment of other Lifestyle Factors, especially improved body waste elimination.

Tibb and Physis

Tibb differs from conventional medicine by being totally committed to protecting and supporting Physis. The Tibb

“When Physis is powerful enough to withstand the disease, it does not require the aid of the physician, as in the case of minor illnesses that are self-healing” [Al-Ma'ki]

physician respects Physis, and recognises its prime role in health and disease. He or she accepts that although treatment may be imposed from outside the person's body, proper healing comes from within. It follows, therefore, that any treatment brought to bear by the physician must support, not oppose, Physis. As Hippocrates

put it: “*First, do no harm*”. He meant not only physically or mentally, but also the mechanisms of self-healing.

In practice, the Tibb physician will evaluate the patient's lifestyle, and decide if any aspects of it are acting in opposition to Physis. If so, the destructive feature will be reversed or minimised, so that Physis is supported instead.

Some Tibb herbs have shown undoubted ability to support Physis via the immune system: Blackseed and Turmeric, for example.

For instance, the patient's diet may not be appropriate for the presenting ailment, or he or she may not be getting enough exercise, or there may be a problematic build-up of toxins or body waste. These can be corrected by agreed changes to the patient's lifestyle.

Physis can also be encouraged in several other ways; by applying different forms of therapy, such as massage, hydrotherapy, cupping, fasting and herbal therapy.

Supporting Physis

Tibb's support for Physis takes several forms. First, there are herbal medicines which are given to assist Physis in dealing with ailments where Physis alone is waging a losing war, and self-healing is not working. A group of herbs known as *adaptogens* produce a robust defence against stress, and help normalise the body's metabolism, so restoring homeostasis.

Second, there are a number of recommended changes to a person's diet and other Lifestyle Factors which also support Physis. Third, there are a number of therapies, such as therapeutic cupping, aromatherapy and acupressure, which are known to encourage Physis

Tibb adopts an holistic approach to treatment. The person's ailment emerges from several negative factors

The Tibb Lifestyle Factors are: proper breathing, wholesome food and drink, regular physical activity, refreshing sleep, emotional harmony, efficient excretion.

conspiring together to overcome Physis. Treatment should therefore take a multi-factorial approach, as it is unlikely that one remedy will deal with several negative factors. Options are various combinations of herbal medicine, massage, dietotherapy and therapeutic cupping. This approach is not only more likely to

remove troublesome symptoms, but also to deal with the underlying cause of the disorder.

Tibb unequivocally accepts that no treatment should interfere with the actions of Physis. It regards certain symptoms as part of the healing process. Diarrhoea and vomiting are considered natural Physis-driven processes which aim to expel toxins (whether microbial, chemical or toxins present in food) from the body as quickly and effectively as possible. Suppressing these symptoms actually frustrates Physis, to the detriment of the patient. The same attitude applies to fever, inflammation and skin rash.

Physis and the doctor's role

The word 'physician' is actually derived from the word Physis. The true role of the physician is to support Physis in

"To do nothing may also be a good remedy"
[Hippocrates]

maintaining good health and assist it in the healing process. To achieve this, the factors governing Physis must be understood and their importance accepted. This allows the physician to plan and carry out treatment accordingly. It also indicates

when no treatment is necessary, so allowing Physis to work unimpeded. This is distinct from the conventional

approach: the doctor is trained to do something to treat; he or she is *not* trained to *not* treat.

"Each patient carries his own doctor inside. We are at our best when we give the doctor who resides within each patient a chance to go to work"
[Albert Schweitzer]

The physician will also appreciate the value of a *Physis response*. For example, when a person has eaten something that disagrees with him or her, then vomiting or diarrhoea is a natural reaction. The physician should be aware of this, and assist Physis by devising

effective treatment which is in harmony with the body's healing mechanisms. Treatment comes from outside; healing from within. As Chishti states in his famous Handbook:

“Behind every natural action of the human body is an inherent wisdom, a mechanism [Physis] that allows the body to heal itself. In fact, no herb, food or other substance or procedure can do anything on its own to heal. It can only assist the body in its own self-healing role. If your finger is cut, it is not the stitches or the bandage or the iodine that causes it to heal; it is the skin itself that performs this miracle” [Chishti, 1985]

Physis and time

The role of Physis is to maintain homeostasis in the body, and restore it when disease strikes. This takes time, partly because the equilibrium is dynamic or unstable in nature, as it involves living matter, which is constantly in a state of flux. Chronic disorders such as high blood pressure and arthritis take years to develop, and so the restorative processes will, understandably, also take time. Dealing with the underlying disharmony linked to the ailment cannot be achieved overnight. Physis acts gently, but firmly, and needs time. Another reason is that diseases rarely arise from one single cause, but are multi-factorial in nature. Restoring harmony to this situation needs more time. There is no 'quick fix' with Physis.

What Physis abhors is too-rapid changes in the person's lifestyle or behaviour. For example, it is upset by changes from hot to cold in the working, social or domestic environment and this can contribute to disturbed homeostasis, so making the person more vulnerable to microbes or metabolic changes. Physis also abhors rapid changes in food intake, from, say, a normal to a high protein, or high fibre, or a low carbohydrate diet, or the sudden use of high dose supplements and vitamins. These too disturb the person's inner harmony. Any changes to the person's Lifestyle Factors should be done gradually, not explosively.

Interestingly, indirect support for Physis' slow but steady action can be seen in most people's medicine cabinets. The amount of unused drugs, originally prescribed for conditions which needed a visit to the doctor, is evidence of this. The fact that they are not actually used fully is mute testament that recovery has often been achieved through inner healing, and that the drugs themselves have merely 'gone along for the ride'.

Is the idea of inner healing (Physis) unique to Tibb?

No. It is a major, even central, feature of several natural healing systems, but known under different names. Hippocrates described it originally as *Vis Medicatrix Natura*. In the Orient, it is known as *Chi Energy* in Chinese Medicine, and as *Prana* in Ayurvedic Medicine. In the West, it is termed the *Life Force* in Homeopathy, *Nature* in Naturopathy, and variously referred to as the *Vital Force*, *Divine Wisdom*, *Mother Nature* and the *Hierarchical Principle* in other forms of natural medicine.

Physis and the immune system

An important part of Physis is *the immune system*. This distinguishes *self* from *non-self*, and protects us from the latter by an exquisite range of defence mechanisms.

The immune system is a major part of our body defences against diseases, especially cancers and infections.

The body's immune system was designed to recognise and kill foreign invaders like parasites, bacteria and viruses. It also has the exquisite ability to seek out and kill renegade cancer cells that arise in our bodies due to the malign effects of toxins, chemicals and radiation. This happens all the time without our realising it.

We live in a hostile environment, surrounded continuously by a wide range of microbes and organic matter, some of which can give rise to diseases. Internally, cancers are being formed regularly, often triggered by radiation,

environmental chemicals or toxins, and the consumption of certain foodstuffs. The body's immune system, which is made up mainly of white blood cells and the lymphatic system, is the reason we are not normally affected by these hostile forces, outside or inside. It protects us from these harmful agents.

A fair percentage of the immune system resides in the bacterial population of the gut and skin – the so-called *microbiome*. This makes up around three per-cent of our body mass. Not all bacteria are pathogenic, and many help us to digest food and provide us with many essential nutrients to keep our inner harmony. Maintaining a healthy population of the gut and skin bacteria is achieved by suitable diet, adequate water intake, and efficient elimination of toxins. This is achieved in Tibb by adhering to the Lifestyle Factors, and by application of the principles of dietotherapy.

Summary

The human body strives for optimum health by acting constantly to maintain inner dynamic harmony, or homeostasis. It is self-healing, self-repairing and self-maintaining. Tibb regards the state of optimal health as the norm, and the natural outcome of harmony in the body. Disease follows when disharmony prevails. Physis is the administrator of the body, and exists to ensure this inner harmony is maintained. It acts to heal and restore the body to full health when it is sick, and protects and regulates its development during the growing years. As the regulator for

Good health results from a dynamic and harmonious balance between our nature, our environment, and our lifestyle. Physis is the intrinsic ability to preserve health; it is the power supporting the healing processes.

homeostasis, it is essentially the human's 'inborn intelligence of health'.

Tibb regards disease as the result of a disturbance to this harmony over time. Tibb treatment therefore aims to support and enhance the inner healing properties of Physis. This is contrary to much of conventional or modern therapy, which often opposes or

diminishes the beneficial effects of Physis. Tibb achieves this directly by herbal therapy, dietotherapy, hands-on treatment like massage, various exercises, and therapeutic cupping. It also supports Physis indirectly by advising on changes to a person's lifestyle. These may relate to personal behaviour, improvements to the living environment, and exposure to both natural and man-made toxins.

Awareness and support of the Lifestyle Factors which support and boost Physis, is a relatively low-cost option and could prove to be an excellent investment. Supporting Physis makes good economic sense at a time of diminishing financial resources.

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