



Bacterial infection - the Tibb view

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“The battle against infection has been won”. So said the US Surgeon General, somewhat prematurely, way back in 1969. Not only has infection not been conquered, but there has been a disturbing increase in their numbers - and many antibiotics are turning out to be ineffective against pathogenic bacteria at best, and harmful to the patient at worst. In spite of this gloomy scenario, the standard medical approach to treating infection, especially those arising from disease-causing ('pathogenic') bacteria is still very much the same: treat the infected patient, usually repeatedly, with increasing doses of one or more antibiotics. If one doesn't work, no problem: try another. And there are now more than 160 antibiotics to choose from.

Although 'combat medicine' can claim many successes, especially in life-threatening infections, serious problems with antibiotics are acknowledged. Amongst these are a lack of effectiveness, depression of the immune system and side effects. On top of this, alarming reports of bacterial resistance are becoming increasingly common - such as MRSA in hospitals and, more recently, XDR TB in the community.

Is it not time for a different approach to the treatment of infectious diseases?

Tibb feels it is. Rather than relying on dosing with large amounts of what are in effect toxic, synthetic chemicals, Tibb encourages the body's natural, built-in healing and defence mechanisms, known as physis, to play an active role in combating infections. It stresses that a strong physis, including a robust immune system, is the best way to fight infections. A person suffering from a serious infection should focus on strengthening physis, by applying the Tibb governing, or lifestyle, factors, especially his or her diet. This will not only speed up the patient recovery from infection, but make them less susceptible to further episodes.

Tibb is not against antibiotics if they have a part to play, especially in life threatening infections. But they should be used judiciously, and as a partner in an integrative approach.

Introduction

In 1969 the US Surgeon General stated that “the battle against infection has been won”. As we all know, this statement is premature to say the least. Not only has infection not been conquered, but there has been a dramatic increase in their numbers, they are spreading at a faster rate, and many antibiotics are becoming increasingly ineffective at best, and harmful at the worst. Recent statistics point to a marked increase in the occurrence of infections, with no real signs of any abatement.

Irrespective of this gloomy picture, the conventional medical approach to treating infection, especially those arising from disease causing ('pathogenic') bacteria is still very much more of the same: dosing the infective patient, usually repeatedly, with one or more antibiotics (of which more than 160 are now available). Although there are undoubted success stories emanating from this approach, especially in life- threatening infections, there are serious problems of intolerance, as side effects, to the antibiotics. On top of this, disquieting reports of bacterial resistance are becoming increasingly common.

Perhaps now is the time for a different approach to the treatment of infectious diseases, especially those arising from bacteria¹. Maybe there is a need to rely more on and encourage the body's built-in healing, defence mechanisms, rather than the ingestion of large amounts of what are in effect toxic, synthetic chemicals.

Tibb, an age old system of healthcare, based on the teachings of the father of medicine, Hippocrates, and developed into its present form by Ibn Sina and his Arabic associates, offers a more comprehensive approach to infection². It rejects the mind set of doling out antibiotics indiscriminately, as this has obviously not worked. It also focuses more on the infected person's immune system and other protective mechanisms, supporting it with a range of reasonable and realistic measures.

What is Tibb?

In the early days of medicine, people who contracted a disease were thought to have done so because there was a serious disturbance in the equilibrium which normally exists between the four basic humours, or body fluids (blood, phlegm, yellow and black bile). Not having knowledge of bacterial infection, doctors in the past concerned themselves with the maintenance of health more than with fighting the "war on disease". Although the techniques for detecting microbes were yet to come, the early physicians, suspected their existence, and considered that "corrupted" air and water was a major contributor to disease. In fact, Ibn Sina (also known as Avicenna in the western world), and acclaimed as the "Prince of Medicine" explained way back in the 9th century that this corruption occurred due to "earthly and airborne noxious agents" which surround us, enter the body and cause "putrefaction". And a person coming into contact with a person suffering from putrefaction would also succumb to the disease. He also thought that unwise eating and drinking, poor sleeping patterns, physical exhaustion or damage, mental disturbances such as fear, sorrow and anger also contributed to the disorder. These are simply known as the governing factors. Essentially, Ibn Sina identified both a causative agent for infection, or putrefaction, and the risk factors which make the body more vulnerable to it.

Two other important factors in the origin of the disorder were also recognised. One is a person's temperament, which is a reflection of a person's physical make-up (constitution) combined with his or her personality. Temperament is now known to play a very important role in the onset of diseases in general.

- The main axioms of Tibb
- Physis - the body's power for self-healing
- Temperament - what makes each of us unique
- The Governing Factors - behaviour patterns which influence health achievement
- Macrocosm - aspects of the environment which affect our health
- Microcosm - the body's internal milieu which maintains harmony

When the temperament of any part of the body is changed, a more welcoming environment is offered to the air and water which carry the offending agents. This concept helped the physicians solve to their satisfaction the puzzle: why do some people get the disease, and not others? Because every person has a unique temperament, and so are susceptible to different degrees to particular disorders.

The other factor is physis. This is a person's innate ability to heal from within. Briefly stated Physis is the vital force which helps to maintain homeostasis in the myriad of complex processes we recognize as life. The immune system is an important component, but by no means the only, part of physis.

In the past, therefore, the disorders presently labeled 'infectious diseases' were thought to arise from disturbances to the person's internal harmony, initially triggered by noxious agents present in the environment, and aggravated by a person's particular lifestyle. Whether or not a person developed a disease depended on his or her temperament, plus the strength and responsiveness of the person's physis.

Yet another aspect of Tibb is the interaction with the external and internal environments, or the macrocosm and microcosm. In Tibb, it is essential to maintain a harmonious relationship with these, whether it is the external one around us involving the skin, or the internal one of the lungs and digestive tract. We take from the environment what we need and can use, and reject what we don't need. These concepts were also endorsed by the famous English physician Culpeper in the 17th century.³

Tibb and probiotics

Our bodies are host to a multitude of bacteria which colonise the skin, gut, urinary tract and other parts. There are probably more bacteria associated with the body than there are cells of the body itself. Even the skin, continually exposed to a hostile atmosphere and repeated attacks from soap, water, UV rays, and physical abrasion, has something like 10,000 bacteria per square centimetre.

These bacteria live harmoniously with us, without causing harm or influencing anatomy physiology and susceptibility to pathogens. Even so they can be harmful, or pathogenic, when they arrive in the wrong place in large numbers, as with abscesses and dental caries. However, these benign bacteria help us to resist the incursions of more aggressive bacteria which can lead to disease.

In Tibb, the skin and gut are the body's interfaces with the macrocosm, and according to its philosophy, the body assimilates and utilises what it can from it, and rejects what cannot be used. It therefore encourages the maintenance of a healthy gut bacterial colony.

Summary

The idea of 'combat medicine' which is central to the conventional treatment of infection is failing to provide much-needed advances. In contrast Tibb stresses that a strong physis, especially the immune system, is the best way to fight infections. Antibiotics do have a place, especially in the life threatening infections, but they should be used judiciously, and as part of an integrative approach. This means that a person suffering from a serious infection should strengthen physis, by paying attention to the Tibb governing factors, especially diet. This will not only speed up the patient's recovery from infection, but make them less susceptible to further episodes.

The Tibb approach to infection is to support physis, compensating for a person's weakened or overloaded bodily defenses, and to manage the symptoms of infection, such as fever. This contrasts with the conventional way of killing the bacteria with antibiotics, and suppressing the fever. The latter approach may have life-saving value, but will not prevent infections from re-occurring. The Tibb approach should lead to improved immunity and a reduced rate of recurrent infections.

As Tibb can be effectively combined with conventional antibiotics in the form of integrative medicine, there should be an improved outlook for a person with an infectious disease.

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