



Physis comes in from the cold

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What is physis?

If one looks up the word 'physis' in most dictionaries, one invariably draws a blank. And yet, the word occupies a central position in the philosophy of medical care which was practiced in the West and elsewhere until a couple of centuries ago. Maybe the time has come to re-examine this concept in the light of present day understanding of health, disease and healing, and reinstate the word into our medical vocabulary. Especially as it may be the key to our understanding of such phenomena as the placebo response, spontaneous healing, and even miraculous cures. Briefly stated, "physis" is the vital life force, inherent in the human body, which helps to maintain equilibrium or harmony within the internal environment, so allowing the proper functioning of the cells, tissues and organs¹. In addition, it regulates the reservoir of energy which is the driving force behind maintaining homeostasis in the myriad of complex processes we recognise as life. From the term physis we derive the more familiar 'physician', or one who (originally) assisted or managed physis by expert personal guidance and coaching. Physis is a manifestation of purpose in the human body, which is both spontaneous and autonomous. Although physis as a useful idea has been incorporated from early Greek medical thought into Tibb philosophy, it is by no means unique or exclusive to this particular medical paradigm². There is a wide variety of medical or healing systems which are conveniently termed alternative or complementary to orthodox medicine, many of which appear, at first glance, to be disparate, and completely unconnected. However, most of them are united in one important core aspect, when treating the patient, they act primarily to support the body's inner healing systems, rather than merely suppress the patient's symptoms.

Exponents of Chinese medicine and acupuncturists have equivalent concepts to physis, using the term "Qi". Moreover, practitioners of Ayurveda refer to 'prana'; homeopaths call it 'dynamis'; and in early Western holistic medicine it was labelled the 'etheric body'. It has also been variously described as 'the vital force', 'inatura' and the "hierarchical principle". In the human being, physis has an innate ability to orchestrate the body into maintaining dynamic optimum functioning, better known as homeostasis. It acts to heal the body when it is sick, restore it when it is depleted, and to develop and thrive when supplied with suitable nourishment. As the regulator for homeostasis, it is essentially the human's 'inborn intelligence of health'. In the event of disease (or even when the body fails to reach its ideal state), physis acts to correct imbalances and disharmony. One important feature of physis is that it operates in all dimensions of health in the physical, the emotional, the spiritual, and, arguably, the social. In the early days of the Western medical tradition, physis was used to describe the natural vitality of what is now recognised as the immune system, in its spontaneous response to environmental influences. It was quickly brought into action to detect and react to both supportive and disruptive factors. In fact, one component of physis is our immunological identity, which forms the molecular basis of healing.

Another aspect of physis, which is a key focus of the relatively new discipline of psychoneuroimmunology (PNI) is the placebo response, and the possibly associated phenomenon of spontaneous healing. Development of the concept of physis The Greek philosopher-physician Hippocrates (460-377 BCE) played a major role in releasing western medicine from the shackles of magic and superstition, and bringing it into the realms of science. Although he is justly famous as the originator of the humoral theory, he also introduced the concept of physis as part of

‘Nature heals, and the physician is only nature’s assistant’.
Hippocrates

his medical model. In this, Hippocrates considered the body as a complex, integrated, holistic system, not just as a collection of its components; the whole was regarded as more than the sum of the individual parts. He regarded health as an expression of a harmonious balance between the various dimensions of the human being (body, mind and spirit), the environment, and the person’s adopted lifestyle.

Furthermore, he showed that disease was a natural process, and that the signs and symptoms were the predictable reactions of the body to the disease. It arose, he suggested, from a loss of equilibrium between the body itself, the ‘microcosm’ and the surrounding environment, the ‘macrocosm’. The reciprocal relationship between the body and the environment breaks down in disease, because the body either has difficulty in assimilating effectively what it needs from the environment, or ejecting completely what is toxic, or which it no longer needs. Once this happens, he stated, there is a natural tendency in the body towards self-healing, which he labelled ‘vix medicatrix naturae’.

His therapeutic attitude, therefore, was based on a general approach to the diseased person, rather than a specific treatment against a range of symptoms. Moreover, he relied heavily on supporting the body’s intrinsic self-healing mechanisms to deal with the illness, by special diets and behaviour modification, rather than routinely introducing external agents. What would Hippocrates; (‘first do no harm’) attitude be towards much of present day therapy, which

is firmly based on symptom suppression rather than dealing with the underlying cause, is a matter of conjecture. One can easily imagine his total opposition to the modern oncological procedures of surgery, radiation, and chemotherapy, whose avowed aim is uncompromising and total destruction of selected parts of the body. We can also predict his substantial disquiet with the real risk to health posed by widespread use of some present-day analgesics, non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, antihistamines, statins, beta blockers, and numerous other commonly used agents. Their mode of

“When physis is powerful enough to withstand the disease, it does not require the aid of the physician, as in the case of minor diseases that are self-healing”
Al-Malki

action is interference with the normal biochemical pathways which make up the body’s metabolism. He would most likely conclude that many drugs administered by the orthodox doctor appear to work against, rather than with, physis; to oppose rather than assist.

The attitude towards physis remained more or less the same until the advent of the Cartesian mind-body dualism in the 17th century, a concept that has dominated medical thinking in the West since¹. Later, towards the end of the 19th century, the advent of the science of bacteriology gave rise to the notion of the aetiological origin of disease. Instead of regarding disease as being caused by disharmony within tissues or organs, the theory there was a specific cause (bacteria, virus or endocrine abnormality, for example) which was deemed responsible for the symptoms of the disease became established, and pre-dominated over the previous paradigm.

Modern medicine as a rule separates mind and body. As Leviton² comments: ‘the body acts, the mind observes, the person suffers, and the doctor manipulates the interface with drugs’. In this context, modern medicine has no real place for physis, as it is an abstraction, and not amenable to scientific investigation. Microscopic inspection of organelles, cells, tissues and organs has failed to detect any real physical evidence of this concept.

Perhaps the concept of physis was invoked by the early philosophers to explain the efficient running of what appeared, even to them, with their very limited observational and investigative tools, as the immensely intricate, dynamic and interactive workings of the human body. The human being, from cell to whole body, is an unbelievably complex structure, probably beyond our capacity to understand it³. Far from being a predictable system of enzymes, proteins, lipids, carbohydrates, salts and so on, the living cell is perceived as being infinitely intricate; as we learn more about it, more areas of ignorance are uncovered, more questions are being asked, and our awareness of the enormous complexity is increased. This complexity, we now know, extends to the relationship of our body and mind with the environment, whether the myriad of natural and man-made toxins we are exposed to, the stresses we undergo, and even to the symbiotic relationship with intestinal micro-organisms.

The organisation and control of living cells, tissues and structures are now known to be unimaginably complex, whether their myriad functions of transport, internal metabolic regulation, maintenance, defence mechanisms, structural integrity, in the reproductive processes, or in the timing of the metabolic processes. Even today, we are learning more and more of the features of internal cellular architecture, or regulation by hormones, cytokine networks, feedback loops and other important aspects of the cell's diverse operations. The control and regulation of this microcosm, in space and time, is exerted by physis. In the healthy body the inner harmony of the cells and tissues is maintained by physis, and deviations from this are actively counteracted. Physis attempts to restore the person's ideal state. However, when disharmony arises which is beyond the ability of physis to oppose effectively, then signs and symptoms will appear which signal the onset of disease.

The body as a machine

The concept of physis is diametrically opposite to that which characterises modern medicine, which is dominated by the principle that the body should be regarded as a machine; unbelievably complex, but a machine nevertheless. Moreover, the body, according to modern medicine, is understood in terms of a collection of cells, tissues and organ systems, and how they interact. The heart, brain, lungs and so on, and their structures are not regarded as parts of a unique person, but as anonymous parts in general. People with diseases are treated with standard medical or surgical therapy according to the disease itself, with scant regard for the uniqueness or individuality of the person affected by it. Faulty mechanisms in specific tissues are suppressed or stimulated, and defective parts are replaced wherever possible. Treatment is generally palliative, with little attention paid in most cases to the underlying causes of the disease. On the other hand, physis arises from the premise that the body is infinitely more complex than any conceivable machine, and disorders call for a different treatment approach. This strategy involves supporting the affected person's internal power of healing with a range of therapeutic stratagems which include consensual lifestyle modification, without adversely affecting the integrity of the person's innate healing processes.

Physis and disease

Understandably, the countless processes that characterise living tissue are not free from disorders. Considering the vast number of potentially injurious agents around and within us, it is something of a miracle that we ever healthy. In most cases, the tissues, or organs, intrinsic healing mechanisms rapidly act to restore harmony. For example, the vast majority of cancers which develop at the cellular level are eliminated almost as quickly as they arise, as the immune system maintains constant surveillance throughout the body, and eliminates cancerous growths as they appear. Generally, there are a number of so-called 'physis responses', by which the body deals with the many threatening agents, such as toxins. These include the expulsive reflexes, such as sweating, vomiting and diarrhoea, and the adaptive responses such as inflammation and fever. However, if disturbed processes in the living tissue cannot be rectified efficiently by physis, then a disease will manifest. Symptoms will appear; these can be regarded as part of the body's language signalling that physis is incapable of rapidly dealing with the state of disharmony or lack of homeostasis brought about internal or external influences. Symptoms of a particular illness were regarded positively by the early physicians as a sign that physis was now under pressure in maintaining homeostasis, and acting against the actors responsible for the disorder, infection, inflammation, or injury, that was affecting the person.

In most if not all of the healing systems in existence, these physis responses are not to be suppressed, but should be encouraged in a regulated fashion.

Frequently physis may require the conscious mind of the individual it serves to become aware of both its existence and its ability to relieve the clinical disorder, and then deliberately to work together with it. This is where the planning of a lifestyle appropriate to one's ideal state is vital.

Physis and the placebo response

A placebo is a “therapeutically worthless, inactive, neutral substance made to physically resemble the active drug”², generally used in randomised clinical trials, which are the gold standard of modern clinical

research. A placebo effect is an unanticipated mind-produced response to a placebo. At a first glance, the placebo response would appear to be close or even identical to the physis response. However, physis transcends the physical, emotional and spiritual dimensions of the individual, although it can manifest in one form or another.

“For many doctors, the practice of placebo medicine has an unsavoury scent about it. It seems to involve deception and trickery, and so is not clearly distinguishable from quackery”.
Andrew Weil

Physis and spontaneous healing

Spontaneous healing, or remission, is the sudden and inexplicable recovery from serious or incurable clinical disorders without any real medical intervention³. Alas, it is often regarded by orthodox doctors as an unpredictable aberration or fluke, and considered very rare. One analysis suggests that this phenomenon may be more widespread than previously thought, and that, as O'Reagan comments⁵, spontaneous healing, ‘gives us the strongest evidence that there is an extraordinary self-repair system lying dormant within us’. Maybe, he suggests, spontaneous remission is the way the body rallies itself to fend off disease, and may be a ‘goldmine’ that needs to be studied. Could not this be another description of physis?

Physis and Tibb

Tibb can be briefly described as “the art of serving, with respect, the physis of each person”¹. Tibb, also known as Unani-Tibb or the Unani system of medicine, is a system of complementary medicine widely used for many centuries, mainly on the Indian sub-continent. Its origins can be traced to Hippocrates, Galen and Ibn Sina (Avicenna). It embraces the physical, emotional and spiritual dimensions of the person, and believes that the role of medicine is to restore harmony to the body, by supporting physis in promoting healing⁴. It focuses on achieving and maintaining health by encouraging healing from within, and not just by suppressing symptoms. Prominent features of Tibb are an awareness of the uniqueness of the person, expressed as his or her temperament, and the importance of maintaining a prudent lifestyle, by regulating the main aspects; diet, breathing, emotions, sleep, rest, and toxin elimination. These approaches do not seek to eliminate a disease by direct, head-on confrontation, as orthodox medicine tends to do in most cases, but to strengthen the body's ability to transmute the ill-health-producing influence, and so restore itself to health.

“Each patient carries his own doctor inside him. We are at our best when we give the doctor who resides within each patient a chance to go to work”

Albert Schweitzer

A major axiom of Tibb philosophy is that the role of the doctor or healthcare worker is to assist physis to encourage ‘the inner physician’, by investing much time and effort in arriving at an accurate diagnosis based on the patient's symptoms and signs, and taking into account the patient's physical, emotional and spiritual circumstances¹.

When disease manifests, or even when the body fails to reach its ideal state, physis acts to correct imbalances and non-ideal states. Even though physis is a

kind of generic energy informing all human organisms, it is highly individualised with each person.

That is why illness and the symptoms of disease can be so variable from one person to another even though they all have the identical ailment. Each body expresses its unique dynamic pattern.

Tibb considers that physis exerts its main effects through what it terms the three major faculties; based upon the heart (vital), the liver (metabolic) and the brain (psychic). Collectively these ensure that the myriad of processes in the living body are kept in the optimum state of homeostasis, so encouraging health, and adapt appropriately during disease. However, when the loss of homeostasis becomes so severe or long lasting that physis is unable to restore it, then the patient's quality of life is lost, the disease progresses inexorably, and even death can result.

Therapy with Tibb is directed at creating the ideal bodily terrain in which physis can operate. It focuses on supporting physis essentially by removing physiological noise and clutter, by advocating better diet, elimination of physical, mental and emotional toxins, and resolving stress and its initiators.

In practical terms Tibb accepts that the patient's troublesome or alarming symptoms have to be relieved, and does provide the necessary remedies. However, it does not support the habit of taking drugs routinely to relieve results of non-prudent living which are not essential to combat an illness, as it views these as unnecessary interference with the integrative processes within the body. Included in this are drugs to relieve indigestion, laxatives, appetite suppressants, anxiolytics and hypnotics. Tibb also adopts a more circumspect attitude to the body's physis response to infection. Fever and inflammation are parts of the physis response and need to be encouraged rather than suppressed unless redundant or excessive in duration.

Conclusion

Physis embodies healing from within, and underlies the idea of strengthening the body's innate ability to oppose the agents of disease. Therapeutic approaches that support physis should be given greater prominence; not only are they generally cheaper than the hi-tech conventional medical systems usually employed in affluent communities, which usually suppress symptoms, but are substantially free from the inevitable adverse drug reactions that plague orthodox medicine. These approaches also introduce an element of self-empowerment of the patient in his or her treatment, which itself augments the healing process. Health is viewed primarily as the patient's responsibility, and this is expressed ultimately through physis.

Physis is a timeless concept which is part of the fabric of a number of healing systems, old and new. Unfortunately it has been subdued in recent times by the overwhelming successes of modern medicine, and therapeutic approaches involving it have been consigned to the fringes of medical practice. However, the practice of modern medicine has in no way been an unalloyed success, in spite of the massive expenditure poured into the development of safe, effective drugs. Perhaps now is the time for healing programmes based on physis to be re-evaluated. Perhaps it is time for physis to come in out of the cold.

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