
Appreciative Medicine

AN INTEGRATIVE APPROACH TO PATIENT-CENTERED HEALTH CARE

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As medical doctors, we are continually challenged by our patients. Today, more than ever, we are urged to consider alternative approaches to patient care. We frequently ask ourselves how we can improve patient care and outcomes. In this article, I will present an alternative dialogue for use in interacting with patients, which will simultaneously reignite our own passion for the healing arts. It is a new paradigm in health care that restructures the physician's role to one of a partner, working together with patients to create powerful healing dynamics. I call this approach Appreciative Medicine.

I. MEDICINE TODAY

Every day we hear about breakthrough technologies that support conventional medicine, such as sensational new wonder drugs or MRI, PET, and advanced CT scanners that detail the inner workings of the human body. This is in keeping with a health care system primarily based on *allopathy*, typically defined as a “substitutive therapy ... in which a disease is treated by producing a second condition that is incompatible with or antagonistic to the first.”¹

Although most health care today is focused around the allopathic management of chronic disease, acute care centers exist to handle cases of major illness, such as chest pain, cerebral-vascular accidents, or traumatic motor vehicle collisions. The emergency department is still the optimal setting to stabilize and save life.

At the same time, patients often feel less than satisfied with the scope of conventional medicine. For routine care, more people are gravitating toward the holistic, natural treatments promised by practitioners of “alternative medicine.” Patient response in this direction has fueled what is now a 40 billion dollar industry.² We commonly encounter the terms *wellness - health - optimal well-being - peak performance*. Are these concepts more than a convenient marketing tool? Some alternative methods are clearly gimmicks, but research shows that others truly complement allopathic care.

Regardless of the healing modality one may choose, three questions still remain:

- 1) As a physician, how can I better advise patients to create an improved state of functioning?
- 2) How can I enhance my understanding of the needs of my patients and create individualized healing plans?
- 3) How do I maximize preventive/proactive care?

Patients and physicians alike want to enjoy more life in their day. We all see the limitations of the disease model and want our patients to experience improved well-being.

II. IS “ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE” REALLY AN ALTERNATIVE?

No doubt, alternative medicine in combination with conventional allopathic care has brought comfort, healing, and good health to millions around the globe. Nevertheless, alternative integrative

health systems are not always a true alternative. Many health care approaches may utilize holistic treatment options, but they often encompass the same philosophical approach to patient care -- the problem-oriented approach.³

Many in our profession have tried to redefine their roles as physicians by modifying their scope of practice or even changing the traditional doctor-patient relationship.⁴ At the same time, there is an exodus from mainstream medicine to a diverse mix of venues, propelled by the frustration and obstacles present in today's system. For medicine to be a true alternative, physicians need to consider a new paradigm in patient care, that is, to redefine health challenges as wellness solutions and provide partnership models within the patient-doctor relationship. These activities will parallel the worldwide paradigm shift currently taking place in other scientific as well as professional spheres as we become more aware of the relationship of our emotional state, the essence of our being, and how any physiological changes might affect our overall health.⁵

I believe we can achieve the inner vision of wellness for which we all quest. Even though an optimal quality of life often appears to be just out of reach, amazing "secrets" of health are revealing themselves to us at this progressive moment in history. To hasten the process, I suggest each person create a personalized "road map" of wellness, a unique vision of health offering the highest quality of life on all levels. The following explores the advantages to medicine of such an approach.

III. PATIENT-CENTERED HEALTH CARE: AN INTEGRATIVE APPROACH

We physicians have all questioned our methods when, after examining a patient, we experience a feeling that something was missing or not accomplished during a particular encounter. Could there be a more constructive way to interact with patients? I took a course in acupuncture, thinking it might provide some value for patients. But even after integrating medical acupuncture into my traditional allopathic practice, I felt the need for something more. I identified what was missing as the need for creative dialogue with patients. So I attended numerous workshops and seminars, but none offered a satisfactory alternative approach to patient care that included the communication patterns I believed to be necessary.

Now, after a three-year search for the essentials of holistic dialogue, I have developed the integrative patient-centered approach called Appreciative Medicine.⁶ It includes a four-part, interactive guide to assist health seekers through the maze of care options.⁷ Using the question-answer format, patients enter a process leading to a fundamental change in how they view their health challenges.

The principles of Appreciative Medicine encourage patients to become proactive, to take responsibility and assist in developing their own optimal health plans. On a regular schedule, they review their progress with their primary care physician and critique goals as they plan the next step. This system utilizes medical technological advances appropriately and to the fullest while building upon doctor-patient relationships of trust to provide the most appropriate choices. Appreciative Medicine opens the door to a full range of healing strategies that includes complementary medicine options, some of which have become almost routine, such as acupuncture for back pain or yoga to help lower blood pressure. But more importantly, Appreciative Medicine creates a new opportunity for patients to reframe health challenges and focus on developing an optimal wellness plan.

At the heart of Appreciative Medicine is a personalized approach that highlights patients' unique, positive characteristics and targets solutions for optimal healing. Patients are empowered to

access directions of choice by journaling, with the help of prepared guidelines, in a question-answer format. This process of reflection and journaling benefits both patients and practitioners in subsequent office interactions. Written responses are carefully reviewed with practitioners, often propelling patients beyond their previous limitations.

IV. IMPLEMENTING AN APPRECIATIVE MEDICINE PROGRAM

As in all new beginnings, professionals in the practice of medicine must learn how to implement new tools for change. It begins with us -- one patient at a time. Appreciative Medicine is not for all patients, but this inclusive approach can create a bridge that links the entire continuum of health care services, ushering in an era of healing options based on partnerships and teams. Best of all, Appreciative Medicine offers an opportunity for us to understand the uniqueness of our patients and, at the same time, to recapture our enthusiasm for the healing arts.

Designing and implementing an Appreciative Medicine program is relatively simple:

- ◆ Physicians and other practitioners are briefed on the “Appreciative Dialogue” method, including a journal-oriented workbook; they learn how to share the approach and resources with patients, schedule review conferences, and measure results.
- ◆ Select patients receive the workbooks, along with invitational letters from their physicians or a program coordinator, which explain Appreciative Medicine and encourage patients to participate.
- ◆ Patients are asked to complete the basic workbook pages (objectives, modalities to explore, and summary), bringing their responses to health care providers for discussion and development of individualized treatment plans.
- ◆ Because the workbook allows for ongoing entries, patients are encouraged to continuously reflect on their progress and evaluate the efficacy of the treatment plans from their own perspective.
- ◆ After six to eight weeks, patients meet with physicians to review and monitor their progress and receive further direction in their treatment plans.
- ◆ Results of the program can be assessed by participating physicians and patients, accomplished in reviews and evaluations set up by an Appreciative Medicine coordinator. This role is best serviced by the patients’ primary health care providers.

Appreciative Medicine thus meets challenges that have long beset the health care delivery system: separation, isolation, and fragmentation of services and healing modalities. This is a perspective that seeks to resolve the issues of separation between patient and physician, between practitioners in specialized areas, and between allopathic medicine and complementary disciplines. At the core of Appreciative Medicine are three basic principles:

- 1) deeper participation by those seeking health care;
- 2) increased efforts of primary care physicians to unify all treatments, guiding consultations through integrative and supportive protocols; and
- 3) a focus on creating wellness -- a patient’s innate healing systems are activated not from treatments per se, but by the process of being healed from within.

This is a solution-based, proactive way to achieve the goal of optimal health. Patients progress when they envision total wellness with the help of many professionals working together. Further,

both patients and their health care providers benefit from positive outcomes that make a difference in the quality of life for all concerned.

V. MEETING THE CHALLENGE OF CHRONIC ILLNESS

The time for change is upon us. Clearly, patients and physicians alike are looking for a more human-centered path to health care. Patients say they want choices, especially when it comes to chronic illness. But our health care system has become overwhelmed with costs, utilization, and redundancy. We don't deny that today's medicine can excel in an acute health crisis. For instance, our approach can stabilize, cure and save the lives of patients who suffer acute myocardial infarction, appendicitis, or even sepsis. However, when it comes to chronic health concerns, such as allergies, depression or anxiety, irritable bowel syndrome, or chronic pain, many patients feel that conventional health care has not met their needs.

Physicians often end up placing patients in a maze, where they feel isolated and lost in an array of costly lab tests, X-rays, consultations with specialists, and over-prescribed pharmaceuticals. Our intentions may be pure, but our approach is flawed, often perpetuating "problems" inherent in the system. But we can go beyond particular "complaints" and adopt a better way that maximizes health.

I know of no better way to promote healthier living than by *lifestyle modification*. Yet, too often we are recruited to patch problems rather than to act as partners in helping our patients make significant, healthy lifestyle changes. Patients' problems have become their "ticket" to see a doctor, leading them from one illness to the next. Over a million interactions occur daily within the health system; doctor appointments, emergency visits, and countless ancillary care procedures head the list. In contrast, Appreciative Medicine empowers patients to become more independent, but actively involved in making positive lifestyle choices, which often translates to improved compliance.

After an Appreciative Medicine orientation, what did patients themselves report of most value in achieving renewed vitality? What did they do to gain balance and be able to enjoy life again? The following are typical of selections from patient journal entries, written in the context of the Appreciative Medicine approach: "In my quest for optimal health, I ...

1. Am silent and listen.
2. Listen and trust; I believe in myself.
3. Understand how my body digests and utilizes food.
4. Walk, move, and stretch every day.
5. Spend time in nature; I let it saturate my soul.
6. Avoid all negativity. I avoid all negativity. I avoid all negativity.
7. Optimize my innate healing systems.
8. Pray every day.
9. Celebrate my life.
10. Love -- and don't miss an opportunity to share it.
11. Breathe (fresh clean air).
12. Acknowledge what I feel.
13. Learn; every day presents new lessons.

14. Turn off the television.
15. Respect animals -- to adopt one is to receive 100-fold payback.
16. Protect the environment; I am a trusted steward.
17. Volunteer; I have something unique to give.
18. Take the word *procrastinate* out of my vocabulary.
19. Respect myself, as well as all people, animals, and things.
20. Keep a journal and write in it often.
21. Use all of my senses -- touch, sight, hearing, taste, and smell.
22. Forgive myself (as well as others); I strive to be non-judgmental.
23. Love art in all its forms.
24. Am grateful; I am thankful.
25. Am open to new experiences, ideas, and relationships.
26. Feel that family time is a priority.
27. Drink pure water.
28. Eat food for a healthy body.
29. Plant a garden.
30. Smile (a lot).

VI. THE SOA²R MODEL

For the most part, health care providers currently assess patients with a formula used for many years, a template called “SOAP” (Subjective, Objective, Assessment, and Plan). This familiar, problem-treatment approach may work well enough for certain acute conditions, but I recommend the more comprehensive “SOA²R” model (Solution, Objective, Assessment, Action, Reinforcement of possible solutions), especially in chronic conditions.

For example, Marcus Smith is a 44-year-old patient with a history of chronic lower back pain. He has seen his primary care physician at least eight times a year with exacerbated pain, and he was told a few years ago that his cholesterol was high but is confused about what that means. He cannot remember ever having a physical exam as an adult. What might be missing from Mr. Smith’s treatment plan?

Clearly, this case would look different had the patient interacted with a practitioner using the principles of Appreciative Medicine. On the following page, Table 1 outlines some of the differences between the well-known SOAP protocol and the suggested SOA²R method introduced here. Even so, there are additional activities inherent in the SOA²R model that need further explanation. First, patients derive the *solution* (e.g., an affirming statement) through in-depth reflection. In other words, it is not necessarily the foremost medical opinion of the attending physician. Second, the *objective* supports what patients themselves see as being true, not necessarily what practitioners may observe as problems to correct. Third, health care providers and patients achieve the *assessment* phase together, in which they agree on what *action* is to be taken. Finally, *reinforcement* supports patient-doctor collaboration and does not automatically, or of itself, dismiss or supersede conventional methods of treatment.

Table 1. The Case of Marcus Smith: The Conventional Approach vs. Appreciative Medicine			
Allopathic/Alternative Medicine		vs. Appreciative Medicine	
SOAP		SOA²R	
S	Subjective <i>Low back pain.</i>	S	Solution <i>“My back pain has resolved. I feel stronger than ever. How can I keep feeling strong and flexible?”</i>
O	Objective <i>Multiple trigger points; decreased range of motion; reflexes intact.</i>	O	Objective <i>Range of motion normal; strength good; flexibility increased.</i>
A	Assessment <i>Lumbar strain.</i>	A	Assessment <i>Continue with back strengthening exercises. Recommend stretching and swim therapy.</i>
		A	Action <i>Take a course in yoga. Be conscious of posture.</i>
P	Plan <i>Analgesics, muscle relaxants, return in 2 weeks if symptoms persist. Acupuncture and chiropractic adjustments, and/or herbal remedies.</i>	R	Reinforcement <i>Walk daily. Learn more about the Mediterranean diet. Update tetanus-diphtheria. Schedule yearly physical and have appropriate blood and laboratory testing.</i>

In the SOA²R process, several outcomes are achieved: a) The vicious cycle of problems -- always dwelling on another complaint -- is suddenly broken; b) Patients are in a unique position to be more motivated to carry through with their treatment programs; and c) Patients are empowered to act, truly vested in the agreed upon regimen.

In summary, we are privileged to be medical doctors, gifted with careers that reward us with a humbling life experience. It is up to us to take that first step, to learn about the new infrastructure provided by Appreciative Medicine. We can learn to partner with our patients on a true healing quest. I appeal to all physicians to bring forth their resources for the common good. Pursue creative dialogue with patients and develop personalized health plans that focus on wellness. Together, we can not only effect a system of change but also assist health care itself to take a quantum leap forward.

NOTES

- ¹ *Stedman's Medical Dictionary-25th Edition*. (1990). "Allopathy." Baltimore, MD: Williams & Wilkins.
- ² Eisenberg, D. M., Davis, R. B., Ettner, S. L., Appel, S., Wilkey, S., Van Rompay, M., & Kessler, R. C. (1998). "Trends in Alternative Medicine Use in the United States, 1980-1997." *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 280, 1569-1575.
- ³ Hurst, J. W., & Walker, H. K. (Eds.). (1972). *The Problem-Oriented System*. New York: Medcom Press.
- ⁴ Smith, S. 2003, Sept/Oct. "The Boutique Medicine Boom: Perspectives on the Growth of a Controversial Trend." *Practice Builders*, 2(9) 1,2.
- ⁵ Cooperrider, D. L., Sorensen, Jr., P. F., Yaeger, T. F., & Whitney, D. (Eds.). (2001). *Appreciative Inquiry: An Emerging Direction for Organization Development*. Champaign, IL: Stipes Publishing.
- ⁶ Franklin, T. L. (2004). *Expect a Miracle; You Won't Be Disappointed!* Berkeley, CA: Celestial Arts.
- ⁷ "Step 1: Develop a vision of optimal well-being and set clear, specific health goals.
Step 2: Review healing options that you have utilized in the past. Consider alternatives to be used in the future.
Step 3: Reflect on your accomplishments. Note the benchmarks along the way. When you see where you've been, you become clearer on where you're going.
Step 4: Follow your own individual optimal health plan and focus on the positive realm of goodness and health within you."
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