

The Hospital as a Temple II: Creating a Healing Environment

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At the second Hospital as a Temple Conference, speakers on 'The Healing Environment' were not just dreaming about an ideal, but speaking of what had already been achieved in approaches to care, building ideal healing centres and transforming existing hospitals, which provide models for future developments in medicine and care. Three admissions into a National Health Service hospital since then have brought home to me what an enormous discrepancy there is between the hospitals and types of care the speakers described, and mainstream British hospitals.

DR EVARTS LOOMIS and DR PATCH ADAMS created their own health centres. Loomis set up Meadowlark in 1958, as America's first holistic healing centre, pioneering 'the concept of health as a re-establishment of homeostasis of body, mind and spirit rather than fighting illness'. The focus of treatment was the patient, a 'guest', with the doctor as facilitator and guide. Their bio-dynamic farm produced appropriate food, and they offered the 'energy medicines' of homoeopathy and acupuncture. Patients need an environment in which they experience care, have time to contemplate and explore their own needs and develop a vision or dream. Although Meadowlark closed in 1991, Loomis's ideas about holistic medicine have had a world-wide impact. Hunter 'Patch' Adams approach was equally revolutionary, but from a more anarchic perspective. As a professional clown he believes in bringing fun to everything, aiming to give patients a happy, vibrant and exuberant life, even when dying. 'Fun and joy are cheaper than Prozac'. Dissatisfied with orthodox medicine, Patch and a few colleagues founded the Gesundheit Institute in their own home in 1971, open 24 hours a day, to provide care 'in one package'. To counteract the greed in American medicine they gave free care, with no malpractice insurance, made house calls and gave patients time. Unpaid staff had to earn a living elsewhere. Patch is raising funds for his ideal hospital linked to a school and a medical school. These will integrate education, the arts, farming, and alternative as well as allopathic medicine. Robin Williams will be playing Patch in a film of his life, earning more than Patch needs for his hospital. 'If you are going to stay in the system, be the highest subversive possible in your work and make it look like it is fun, not as if it hurts you.'

When PROF DR ROB WESDORP was recovering from cancer, he found, through the Helen Dowling Institute in Rotterdam, that it was possible to change and develop new priorities through experiential and existential forms of psychosocial therapy which stimulated self-healing potential. With two other professors who had also had cancer, he founded the Assagioli Foundation. He wanted hospitals to integrate care of the mind and body, with good communication, time and attention for the patient, replacing clinical rounds by an opportunity for doctors and patients to talk quietly. Nurses need to be educated to care for the whole patient and to be aware of all the fear and negative energy in the hospital. Silence or meditation rooms are necessary for medical staff and patients so that they could recharge their energy. REN SLUIS, the general director of two hospitals in the Netherlands, was working for changes from an efficiency, input oriented approach towards effectiveness and an output oriented approach, in which solutions for patients were more important than health care products. His hospitals were introducing a more attractive environment, emphasizing health rather than illness and personal support instead of professional aid. Hierarchical structures were being replaced by smaller dedicated units working in teams, with patients treated as co-workers.

Other speakers focused on the process of healing. FAY LOOMIS, opening the conference, gave an illustrated lecture on 'The return of the priest-physician: finding the inner healer'. Her own illness had given her an opportunity for spiritual and personal growth, and she showed how different cultures and periods had searched for healing and wisdom through myths of the sacred journey, symbols, rituals and art. She appealed for the restoration of the personal relationship between the healer and the sick, and between the individual and his or her creator. Relationships were also emphasized by DR MICHAEL MURPHY. A psychiatrist and founder of a hospice, he focused on the wisdom of dying and the practice of wisdom. One has to be prepared to heal or be healed, and fundamental to this is the relationship to ourselves and to others, which needs to be held in a permeable cocoon allowing things to come and negative feelings to seep out. Most religions offer impermeable cocoons so that they are not a healing force or help people cope with the terror of death. Medical training should begin with living cases, not anatomy, which involved dead people, and students should also learn about death. We need to visualize our own death, and work with the death of those near us. Doctors need to say to dying patients, 'I want to give you a blessing, will you give me a blessing?' and create a sacred and loving event allowing both for tears and laughter. Making death a sacred event was also the theme of DR THERESE SCHROEDER-SHEKER'S illustrated talk. Having had a youthful experience helping a dying patient by singing to him, she developed the concepts in the Chalice of Repose project in which the dying individual was anointed with prescriptive music, synchronized to the breath and pulse even if s/he was in a coma. It was played and sung by pairs of musicians on either side of the bed, turning the intensive care unit from chaos to a sanctuary for completion, alleviating distress and fear, decreasing need for morphine and analgesics, and enabling them to let go. Death was longer a failure but a family experience, which physicians and staff could also share. The school of Music Thanatology in Missoula, opened in 1992, has integrated the project into the entire medical practice in Missoula.

DR RAVEN LANG, a pioneer in restoring midwifery in the United States, spoke of the Blessing Way into birth, based on Navaho life-cycle rituals. Before the birth, women friends family and carers gather and dance, sing, offer symbols and gifts, anointing and massaging the expectant mother. This prepares and empowers the woman and creates a feeling of trust that all will be well, reinforced by the collective intention of the group. Raven became skilled at seeing where future problems might lie and could change the course of events by circumnavigating negative outcomes.

BART VAN DER LUGT, chairing, set the theme in context by saying that in order to create a healing environment it was necessary to harmonize and integrate all aspects of care including technology and orthodox medicine but recognizing that the mind and soul were as important as care for the body, and at the end of the conference, suggested that sometimes one had to leave the patient in peace and say, 'Go in peace, take this opportunity to end your life in a holistic way.'

There was a wide variety of afternoon workshops. PATCH ADAMS and SUSAN PARENTI contributed poetry and music and THERESE SHROEDER-SHEKER played musical meditations.

The next conference will be held from May 15-16, 1999 with Larry Dossey. For further information contact Bart and Mañec van der Lugt at Davidhuis, Slotlaan 31, 3062PL Rotterdam, The Netherlands. Fax +31 10 414 9271.