

## Occasional essay

### The power of magic

Patients are vulnerable. No more so than those who have an incurable disease. When the time comes to give a prognosis, while they may appear to accept the sentence, most likely he or she denies the verdict and it is only when constant pain or distress occur that the reality of the disease becomes apparent. Alternative forms of medicine flourish in such an environment, promising everything but often, and cruelly, delivering nothing.

Recently, a patient was admitted to our intensive care unit for the fourth time with an episode of acute on chronic respiratory failure. She was in her 70's and during the last five years required home oxygen for chronic hypoxia caused by a progressive and restrictive kyphoscoliosis with severe right heart failure. She had been, at best, wheelchair bound, although during the last 6 months she rarely ventured from her bedroom and was managed with the continuous help of her doting husband and three daughters. Her respiratory physician had advised the family 5 years ago that she would not live for more than two years.

On the morning of her admission she was found unconscious in bed and was transported rapidly to hospital for further management.

"Could mum have her antioxidant and inhalation treatment continued please?" was the first request from her three daughters, after I had intubated, settled the patient on a ventilator and introduced them to the fact that their mother would once again require 'life support' but that this time it would be for a prolonged period, if not for the remainder of her life, as there seemed to be no acute reversible factor.

"What are they?" I asked, readying myself for anything.

It appeared that, on the advice of a friend, a naturopath had been called who prescribed a 6-hourly inhalation of a colloidal silver solution and a weekly intravenous infusion of a solution containing 20 g vitamin C, 5 g of magnesium sulphate, 5 mg pyridoxine and homeopathic amounts of zinc and copper. The intravenous medication was supplied and administered by the naturopath who also advised discontinuation of her regular medications and against future hospital visits. He told them that the antioxidant and inhaled silver 'treatment' had worked miracles in many of his patients for a diverse range of disorders that had been declared incurable by the medical profession.

After meeting the congenial therapist, more than three weeks before their mother's current hospital admission, they embarked upon his recommendations and it was not long before they were convinced that their mother was being kept alive by his treatment.

"But you come to hospital in spite of the naturopath's advice?" I said, hoping to find some reason for their return to conventional medicine while still remaining fixed to their naturopathic alternative.

"Oh we want all the help that we can get" was the reply, confirming the desperate and inconsistent approach taken by patients and relatives of terminally ill patients.

"Yet your mother has deteriorated with the antioxidant and inhaled therapy?" I said still trying to find logic.

"They haven't had time to work yet" they said eagerly and repeated the unanswerable question that haunts every practitioner managing patients with an incurable disease "and what have we got to lose?"

I desperately wanted to say "but it's been more than three weeks..." and "where is the evidence?....", but didn't, as I felt that this would stretch the point and I wasn't about to change their position.

In general, the public are neither familiar nor convinced by the scientific process. The benefits or otherwise of homeopathy, herbalism and hypnosis for various 'incurable' disorders are usually confirmed by testimonials and anecdotal reports. It seems that that if it cannot be understood the mechanism is validated. The magical and mysterious go hand in hand. The fact that a friend did not respond to being immersed in warm goat's milk has far more meaning than the fact that the process makes no sense. Yet negative anecdotes are rarely, if ever, told (often to save embarrassment), a fact that only adds weight to those stories which are readily told where orthodox medicine 'failed' and a miracle occurred.

Nonetheless, orthodox medicine has its own problems.<sup>1</sup> Even proponents of evidence-based medicine can be emotionally tied to their beliefs.<sup>2</sup> While it is easy to criticise an eccentric practice and hold the medically accepted aloof, in an individual case a practice that poses little harm may sometimes be better tolerated than ridiculed.

"What happened to your patient?" you ask.

The infused antioxidants and inhaled silver were discontinued as the relatives were amenable to some reasoning (e.g. we measured the plasma ascorbic acid, magnesium, zinc and copper levels and found them to be either extremely high or at least above the upper limit of normal. We also cultured a light growth of *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* from the sputum which became a

heavy growth after 24 hr of the nebulised colloidal silver). Nonetheless, the family provided a quartz crystal which they believed would act as a substitute for the antioxidants and inhaled silver. We kept this under her pillow. The patient remained mechanically ventilated for two months and after a prolonged period of weaning (and ignoring blood gas and pulse oximetry measurements) was finally transferred home. She died one day later.

“Do not try to live forever. You will not succeed”  
George Bernard Shaw

L. I.G. WORTHLEY

*Department of Critical Care Medicine, Flinders University of South Australia, Adelaide, SOUTH AUSTRALIA*

#### REFERENCES

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