

PITFALLS OF MODERN MEDICINE: WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM THE ATHARVA VEDA

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ABSTRACT

The essence of medicine is not pure science. What is essential is a balance between art and science. However we have quickly seen in the past fifty years the disintegration of medicine as an art and the advancement of medicine as a science. Now it seems that all that is left is the monetary gain in the treatment of patients. Because of this, minimal progress has been made in the direction of prevention, etiology and cure. Modern medicine runs on maintenance mode. It is imperative that we focus our research on the more ignored aspects of medicine.

Medicine prior to the birth of allopathy has focused on individual attention, community involvement, cure, and faith in God—aspects basically ignored in modern medicine as they are time consuming, politically incorrect and financially not rewarding. I do believe that folk medicine with proper research, documentation and understanding has a lot to offer.

The Vedas are the ancient Hindu scriptures dealing with several aspects of human life. Atharva veda is known to deal with the scientific and technological aspects of human needs. Present day, most of it has remained solely as a myth due to ignorance. However, some of it has been continuing as household remedies and folk medicine. Ayurvedic medicine as it is practiced today is poorly understood and corrupted. My understanding of Atharva Veda, with a limited knowledge of Sanskrit, leads to my inference that certain medicinal plants and cures that are mentioned in Atharva Veda deserve further research. In addition, the human aspects involved in the treatment of a sick patient as expounded in the Atharva Veda will be brought into focus.

The Key Words: Atharva veda, Ayurveda, etiology.

त्रयंबकं यजामहे सगर्विं पुष्टिवर्धनम्
उर्वारुकमिव बन्धनान्मृत्योर्मुक्षीय मामृतात्

This particular Rik or poem is called Mritunjaya Mantra. This chant is from the Vedas, very commonly used on various occasions by Hindus. The term mritunjaya means conquering death. The question here is how do we conquer death? The religious interpretation being that we are invoking the three eyed God “Siva”, the person who emits fragrance, who gives strength and who, just as cucumber separates itself from its stem, releases me from death as I am desirous of immortality. We can interpret this verse in terms of spirituality and attaining eternal bliss, that is Moksha, the soul reaching God thus immortality. Can this also mean attaining filii life thus postponing death as long as possible? Or could it mean to pluck a patient away from death by giving medicinal potions thus increasing longevity? The question here is when there are so many vegetables and fruits which have the same property as that of cucumber, as they all separate from the parent tree or climber, what is the speciality of a cucumber. Is it truly a simile or does this mean anything. If it is truly the cucumber that has the properties or qualities of life saving property, what type of cucumber is it or is there any other meaning for the word उर्वारुकम्

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| उरु | — Wide, excessive, great. |
| वारः | — Water, fluid, perfume, silk, speech, conch shell, mango |
| र्विः | — Vishnu, knot, joint, fire, wind, king, mind, hair |
| कम् | — To desire |
| वार्कः | — Bean |
| वृक्षः | — Sap or just like |
| त्रिः | — Three |
| अलक | — EYES, father |

Thus apart from its spiritual and philosophic meaning, can there be another meaning to this verse. If you think in scientific terms, can the word उर्वारुकम् mean differently. Is this truly a cucumber or any other life giving potion, like a type of plant or extract of conch shell. I feel that there is scope for further research if we have an open mind.

Modern medicine unquestionably contributed enormously towards human well being and alleviating human suffering. Compared to the past few centuries we have progressed economically, scientifically. Longevity

has increased but spiritually we are poorer. Emotionally we are weaker. Can we state with confidence that we are happier? We have to try to answer the hard question, why with improvement in prosperity, longevity, and scientific advancement we are not happier. Where is the disconnection, how can we improve?

I'll try to analyze these aspects based on my experience as a Neurosurgeon in practice for over thirty-five years, and my interpretation of Vedas, the ancient Hindu scriptures. Ancient scriptures of any region or religion can be interpreted in many ways, as the origin of that particular book or author are unknown and the original interpretation is not known and is difficult to understand as language has changed and evolved, thus interpretation has changed over centuries. The grammar and the meaning of words have changed. In order to protect one's religion, the religious scholars have distorted other religious books. People with selfish motives to meet their own ends have altered the meaning of their own religious books. Further, to sell their own ideas, some scholars have given their own interpretation as common man became progressively incapable of understanding the true meaning of the scriptures. Some influential people, like religious leaders and kings, funded the translation of various scriptures through financial power to promote their ideology and thus influencing people. Parts of the original scriptures are lost or hidden. Thankfully, whatever is available to us is still in unaltered form with various interpretations.

Before I started studying Vedas, I was very confused. Many people quoted Vedas with their own unidirectional interpretations. Some scholars passed them as beautiful scholarly poetry. Some religious scholars have been chanting them as hymns praising God. Some philosophers have interpreted these books as philosophical grandeur. Others, like scientists, are exploring them as scientific works as in the case of Atharvaveda. But there are several other views also. My interpretation of Vedas, especially Atharvaveda, is more in keeping with my being a Doctor than possessing any of the other qualities.

They say there are several ways to skin a cat. I just cannot understand why we have to skin a cat. Granted that there are several ways to skin a cat, I would like to categorically state that this is my way of skinning a cat.

Atharvaveda is one of the four Vedas, namely Rig, Yajur, Sama, and Atharva. The origin and author of these books are unknown. The Hindus believe that they came from God directly, even though there are several other hypotheses. As with other religious scriptures, Vedas are believed to be given

to humans for their own well being, prosperity, morality, and happiness. it is for us to understand and analyze them for our own individual advancement or enhancement. If we believe in the origin of Vedas being truly from God, then there is a sincerity in understanding. If not, all bets are off and any interpretation is acceptable according to the context. As I mentioned before, any ancient scripture interpretation differs because of change in the language, grammar, etymology, accent, junctional words, meaning of the word, and most importantly एकपद or angle of thinking.

In my study of Atharvaveda I found a pattern that intrigued me. There are twenty kandaṣ or chapters with subdivisions with 5,933 verses. Modern Vedic scholars consider Atharvaveda as a lesser Veda as they think that it deals with witchcraft or black magic. I refute that thinking as I feel Atharvaveda is a beautiful, scientific, philosophic, medical book. I'll try to address these issues during my talk.

Atharvaveda is mentioned in other three Vedas as Atharva, Angirasa, Brahmaveda. According to Patanjali there are nine branches or Sakhas of Atharvaveda.

1. Paippalada
2. Tauda
3. Maunda
4. Saunakiya
5. Jajala
6. Jalada
7. Brahmaveda
8. Devadarsha
9. Charanaveda

At present time, of the nine only two Sakhas viz Saunaka and Paippalada are available, thus we only have part of the knowledge available. Some believe that Vedas have Aryan origin. The Aryans that we know of were nomadic people, that is people have been wandering from place to place, and did not have a specific area where they lived, thus it is inconceivable that nomadic people who were constantly in search of food and settlement can develop books of highest philosophy, knowledge, and signs. We know very well from our experience of the past, and present, that intellectual growth needs stability, adequate food, and finances. Granted Vedic origins have Aryan background, we have to accept that Aryan people have not come and settled in India but they should have been the natives of India who traveled elsewhere. That is for a discussion on another day.

My study of Artharvaveda led me towards a concept that I feel we can benefit from medically. The chapters deal with various aspects like prayer, yagna, morality, treatment of ailments, medically. The chapters deal with various aspects like prayer, yagna, morality, treatment of ailments, day to day need of humans, philosophy, theology, astrology, death, after death, origin of universe all arranged in a random pattern. They are not grouped as most books do. The question we have to ask is, Is there a meaning to the so-called pattern of hop, step, and jump? I feel there is. I realize no interpretation is perfect, no argument is undefeatable and no hypothesis is undestructible. Experience also taught us that no religion is stagnant and no religion can live in its set boundaries. When we discuss unknown on known experiences, unknown prevails every time.

Atharvaveda centers on yagna or sacrificial rituals and simultaneously deals with various treatments of disease processes along with various day to day needs of human beings. The priest or vaidya or doctor chants the hymns from the scriptures.

ऋचं सामं
 अदा प्राज्ञं हविराजी यजुर्वेदम्
 जम मा तस्मान्म हिंसिद् पृष्टः शचापि

Kanda VII - Hymn LIV-2 (1866)

May I acquire know ledge by the study of the Rigveda. spiritual strength from Samas, and physical power by the study of the Yajurveda O preceptor – the Lord of speech, deed, and intellect, Atharvaveda, full of scientific knowledge, I have studied, do me harm. From this hymn where the physician has to learn the power of know ledge, strength of humbleness, and use his knowledge properly and getrid of arrogance, if not it will be self destructive.

देवा अदुः सूक्तं अद्वाद् द्यौरदान्
 तिरत्रः सारस्वतीरदुः पृथिव्युदान्
 साचेना विषद्वपाम्

Kanda VI - Hymn C-1 (1597)

The learned, with full accord, gives the antidote to poison. The sun sheds his lusture and kills poisonous germs. Heaven, that is sky, gives pure air which kills poison, earth lends its power to eradicate posion.

The three kinds of Vedic knowledge instruct us how to undo the affect of poison. From this hymn it is understood that Atharvaveda gives extreme importance to the nature that we live in and how it gives us the antidote to the poison or disease process.

वि ह्येन वैते जायान्थ जनं युते
जयान्थ जायसे कथं ह तत्र त्वं ह्येन
अस्थ कृष्मी हविर्गृह

We know the origin of consumption. How it is born but it cannot strike this man in whose house we perform the homa.

Homa is a fire ritual where the fire is set with various herbal twigs. Inside the house does the smoke emitted by these medicinal twigs decontaminate the house and probably has medicinal effect on the patient himself and also by destroying the germs prevent transmission of diseases, like infectious diseases, to the family and the surrounding society.

हस्ताभ्यां दशशोभ्याभ्यां
जिह्वा वाचः पृश्नो गवां
अनमाभ्यां मिल्क्यां हस्ताभ्यां
ताभ्यां त्वाभ्यां मृशाभ्यां

Kanda IV - Hymn XIII-7 (692)

With our tenfold fingered hands, with our tongue that leads and precedes the voice, with these two healers of disease, we stroke thee with a gentle, fondling touch. This is a significant verse in terms of doctor –patient relationship. This signifies the effect of gentle touch, tender voice, which has healing property by giving patient confidence, emotional stability, and comfort.

The Artharvaveda that I interpreted from various hymns also discusses: How to fight war. Making of Astra or weapons. How to select a bride. How to select a bridegroom. Vegetarianism. Prayer. Ventilation. How to build a house. Prevention of disease. Atomic theory. Affect of boiling milk. Woman's role in society. Remarriage. The Newton's Law that we know today. Earth's rotation around sun. Sun as the center of our planetary system. Rebirth. Analysis of God or Brehman. Treatment of various diseases. Germ theory. Life in plants, etc. Now why does Artharvaveda

discuss above mentioned various types of knowledge at random mixed with various aspects. We can only understand this book if we understand the pitfalls of the modern medicine.

1. Modern medicine is not holistic.
2. At present we are experiencing poor doctor – patient relationships.
3. in modern medicine we do not have a complete cure, excepting few disease processes like infections, benign tumors, and few other diseases.
4. Modern medicine keeps us on maintenance mode. Once you have a disease you have to take the medicine for rest of your life. Example: High blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease, etc.

Now let's understand why the hymns are arranged in a random fashion, which in my opinion would be helpful for modern medicine.

1. Timing and dosage. Plants vary in medicinal values and potency depending on the timing of the day. The pili that we have now has a uniform potency that may not be adequate in cures so when a physician in Atharvaveda starts treating a patient he would select a time appropriate for that medicinal plant for that particular disease and go on further.
2. Not abandoning the patient. Performing the homa involves the family, society, and the patient. The patient is constantly being watched while the treatment is in progress.
3. Getting family involved. By involving in the ritual, the whole family is involved so that they are around to take care of the patient and also to make themselves strong mentally so that they can handle the adverse situation more effectively.
4. By performing the homa, as I mentioned before, the medicinal values of various herbs and its antiseptis is emphasized.
5. Timing and collection of the herbs and preparation of medicine thus enhancing the potency and dosage and effectivity. As you can see they start with a prayer, give the medicine, continue various other hymns which deal with various aspects of human life, then dispense the next dose depending on what time that particular dose has to be given.
6. Psychotherapy. Gives emotional strength to the patient for both living and strengthening the mind spiritually in the event of unfortunate ending, that is death.
7. Enhancing the immunity. We know psychological strength and spiritual strength has been shown to enhance the immunity.

8. Disseminating and enhancing knowledge during the process of homa and chanting the hymns the knowledge is disseminated to the entire community along with the patient and family.
9. Diverting the thought process of the patient by diverting the attention as the patient goes through suffering. We know in the pain management mental diversion really does miracles in terms of reducing the amount of narcotics.
10. Utilizing the time. By chanting the hymns the assistants to the physician are preparing the next dose of medicine.
11. Time taken to collect and prepare the medicine as they understand the variation in the potency depending on the collection of time and processing.
12. In case of impending death, making it easy and peaceful for the patient and family by spiritual strength.
13. By understanding God, the fear of death is eliminated as there is better understanding of after death.
14. Physician himself taking spiritual guidance as he understands that he can only treat and the cure is in the hands of God and he many times cannot control the outcome of the treatment.
15. By appropriate discussions during the process of treatment, which is inappropriate to that particular patient. Like a king wants to know more about war, what is justice, how to run a kingdom while a philosopher or a preacher or a teacher would like to know more about spiritual knowledge. A business man would like to learn more about how to run a business, how to make his venture profitable. A young woman would understand more about how to raise children, how to select a bridegroom, how to educate herself. how to run the household. Thus physician caters his discussion and dissemination of knowledge according to the context of the situation.
16. Preach what you practice. If physician does not believe in the dictum it becomes a dishonesty. This does not help the physician as this process does not help him in treating the next patient. It is important for the physician to be mentally, emotionally, spiritually strong with adequate knowledge of various medicinal plants.
17. By understanding the fact "I treat, He cures" physician goes on further, becomes psychologically stable, and prevents burn out.
18. By being critical of failures, physician becomes better scientist. By being not truthful and purely financially oriented his progress stops.

19. By understanding the various aspects of life and understanding God in a spiritual way, patient does not blame the messenger, that is the physician, thus less legally inclined.
20. By approaching a disease and a patient holistically, physician is able to cure more diseases and there is chance of further research and progress. Modern medicine has become an industry, an enormous burden to the society, and many patients are not able to afford the proper treatment. Physicians are stressed by enormous volume of patients and financial lure. The governments are unable to maintain the high expenditure incurred to manage the modern medicine and to sustain the present medical care there has to be drastic changes in the system which we can only accomplish by focusing on various aspects that I discussed, along with more focus on cure than maintenance.

