

‘Holistic Healthcare in Action: Reflections on the Past, Directions for the Future’

The need for holistic healthcare is increasingly apparent in light of the climate emergency, change in disease patterns and the ageing population. Holistic healthcare transcends the biomedical model, with a whole person approach that recognises the fundamental connection between the health of the patient, their community and environment.¹ This essay will reflect on the past progress of holistic healthcare and contemplate its future directions including in social prescribing, healthcare delivery and patient consultations.

Celebrating the recent 76th Birthday of the NHS serves as an opportunity to contemplate the significant changes in healthcare and society since its founding. Humans have become an ‘urban species’ with increasing proportions of the population leading digital sedentary lives and ‘non-communicable diseases (NCD) have overtaken infectious diseases as the biggest killers worldwide’.² Climate change is a ‘major threat to human health and wellbeing’ and disproportionately affects marginalised populations, increasing health inequalities.³ This calls for a holistic, preventative approach that addresses the social determinants of health.

Professor Sir Marmot’s ongoing decades of seminal work have significantly shaped our understanding of the social determinants of health from ‘cradle to grave’ and health inequity,⁴ which Dame Whitehead defined as ‘unnecessary, avoidable, unfair and unjust social group health differences’.^{5,6} The Dahlgren-Whitehead Rainbow (1991) captures the influence of various layers on an individual’s health including lifestyle, community, socio-economic and environmental factors.⁷ The Marmot Reviews have grouped the determinants of health inequality into 6 domains: early childhood, education, employment and working conditions, sufficient capital for a healthy life, environmental and living conditions (includes housing), and health behaviours.⁴ The Marmot principles were developed to address these inequalities with first Coventry and then other areas working to implement them to become ‘Marmot cities’.⁴ Crucially, the Covid-19 pandemic and cost of living crisis have had a negative impact on all 6 of the health inequality domains, highlighting the need for future work to reduce these inequalities.⁴

As a medical student, I see social determinants of health affecting patient’s lives daily. Recently, I saw a patient with untreated severe heart disease who had not been able to attend past appointments because of their zero-hour contract, at times could not afford telephone credit, could not communicate, did not have access to learning IT skills and therefore struggled to make appointments with their GP. The doctor’s holistic approach to the consultation enabled the patient to receive the support and treatment they needed.

Estimates show that one in every five patients visit their GP for non-medical reasons.⁸ Social prescribing, a key component of holistic healthcare, is a ‘means of connecting patients to a range of non-clinical services in the community to improve their health and well-being’ by aiming to address social determinants of health such as socioeconomic situation or social isolation.^{9,10} The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of nature for both physical and mental health as well as wellbeing.¹¹ Green social prescribing offers nature-based interventions including ‘green care’ such as walking or gardening and ‘blue care’ activities, involving engaging with water.¹² Nature prescribing programmes are predicted to save the NHS 100 million pounds per 1.2 million people involved.¹³ Importantly, research highlights that accessing green space is ‘equigenic’, reducing health inequalities.^{13,14} Future directions for social prescribing include addressing link worker burnout and retention, increasing financial support as well as evaluating optimal research and data collection methods to expand the evidence base for social prescribing.¹⁰

Health creation is complementary to social prescribing and involves ‘creating the conditions for people to live healthy, meaningful lives’.¹⁵ It is centred around collaboration between local people and professionals as equal partners. Merron Simpson, Chief Executive of the New NHS Alliance, describes the key features of health creating practices as ‘listening and responding, truth-telling, strengths focus, self-organising and power shifting’.¹⁶ For example, in Croydon group consultations for patients with diabetes in a GP setting fostered peer learning about diabetes management and supportive friendships that helped patients meet peers to attend local social prescribing events with.¹⁶ Hospital discharge schemes provide opportunity for health creation, for example community mental health support initiatives.¹⁶

In future, reflecting on hospital design from a holistic perspective incorporating sustainability is vital. As aforementioned, green space and nature connection is important for mental and physical health. Ecotherapy research showed that projecting images of wild natural spaces with recorded birdsong improved mood, increased relaxation and decreased anxiety.¹⁷ In my opinion, the future possibility of incorporating projections of images of nature into ward-based care should be explored to provide a more holistic hospital experience and facilitate recovery. To improve access to green space for patients, relatives and staff, some hospitals, for example Stoke Mandeville, have built on-site vegetable or herb gardens.^{18,13} Hospital gardens could be used as a source of locally grown healthy food. Lifestyle medicine research demonstrates that healthy diets have positive impacts on health and promote the prevention of NCDs including cardiovascular disease and cancer.¹⁹ The EAT Lancet Commission has produced detailed researched and guidance on healthy sustainable plant-based diets, as the food sector is a major contributor to emissions.²⁰ In future, serving locally grown plant based sustainable diets in hospitals would positively affect patient health and wellbeing, lower emissions, minimise packaging and reduce waste.¹³

A crucial future direction for holistic healthcare is the widespread embedding of the holistic approach into consultations. For example, the Human Five consultation tool has been developed to integrate the ‘spectrum of individuals’ health and wellbeing needs’ into consultations and includes reviewing ‘mind, movement, nutrition, body and work’.²¹ Appreciating that wellness as ‘a process toward all-encompassing health’ has patient specific and culturally specific meaning is vital.²² It is important to be mindful of challenges patients may face with attending appointments, for example due to zero hours contracts or caring responsibilities, warranting reflection on adjustments to care delivery from a holistic perspective.²³ Doctors can help patients address health inequalities, for example, by writing a letter to a housing association highlighting that poor housing conditions are worsening the patient’s asthma. Tools are being developed to facilitate this.²³

Research shows that community members rely on their primary care doctor for information about climate change.^{3,24} Doctors should embed screening for climate change risk factors and exploring the impacts of climate change on the patient into consultations.³ This includes reviewing the patient’s social history through a climate lens, screening for exposures for example wildfire smoke and reviewing their food and water sources.³ To address holistic needs, doctors can provide advice for high pollution days and extreme heat and inform patients about how this may affect their health. For example, patients with neurological conditions such as Parkinson’s have increased vulnerability to hot weather.²⁴ Air pollution has been associated with for example adverse pregnancy outcomes, cardiovascular disease and increased allergies.³ Patients may be experiencing eco-anxiety, which is worry about current and future harm to the environment caused by human activity and climate change; research recommends joining community groups for support.²⁵ Behaviour change techniques and motivational interviewing are powerful holistic healthcare tools to encourage patients to adopt healthier and more sustainable choices such as the aforementioned plant-based sustainable diets, which would reduce mortality from NCDs. Encouraging cycling or walking instead of using vehicles where possible simultaneously reduces air pollution and improves cardiovascular and mental health.^{9,10} However, doctors receive varying levels of training on these techniques, which is a key area for future improvement.

In conclusion, there has been incredible progress in the field of holistic health and integrative medicine. In the future, adopting a truly holistic approach to healthcare as the gold standard will be critical to provide sustainable, value based, patient-centred care, reduce inequalities and improve population health and wellbeing. It is cost-saving, increases the resilience of the health system and provides a path to achieve NHS Net Zero.¹³ This will require focusing on the ‘causes of the causes’, expansion of the provision of holistic healthcare education across all medical schools and professional training and strong value-based leadership. Government action and policy creation is essential for facilitating health creation and addressing social determinants of health.⁴

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