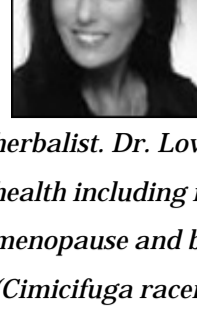


## A New Perspective on Integrative Medicine:

**Tieraona Low Dog, M.D.**



by Russ Mason, M.S.



*Tieraona Low Dog, M.D. is one of the country's leading experts on botanical and integrative medicine. She received her Doctor of Medicine degree from the University of New Mexico School of Medicine after many years of practicing as an*

*herbalist. Dr. Low Dog has published numerous articles on women's health including integrative approaches to pre-menstrual syndrome, menopause and breast cancer and a safety review of black cohosh (Cimicifuga racemosa).*

**RM:** *You are perhaps best known for your work integrating botanicals into mainstream medical practice. Is this a fair assessment?*

**TLD:** It's somewhat of a mischaracterization to say that I am only promoting integration of botanicals into mainstream medicine. My message has always been about viewing each individual as unique and then considering a wide range of options available for treatment. This may involve herbs, but it may also include prescription medication, surgery, massage, acupuncture, or all of the above. I am not trying to force the integration of herbs into a health professional's practice, however, if there is evidence that an herb is effective for a particular condition, it should be considered along side any other treatment option.

My strongest advocacy position right now is not that we teach alternative and complementary medicine in medical schools; but that we bring humanities back into medical education. While stressing the importance of evidence-based, scientific medicine, it is imperative that we prepare health care providers for the real world of interacting with patients on a day-to-day basis. By weaving the humanities throughout the educational process, the medical student, or practitioner, learns to integrate the emotional, spiritual, mental and physical dimensions of the patient. While science can provide information about the best therapy for a given condition, it does little to help the practitioner answer questions such as, "How will I tell my wife I have cancer?" or "Why is this happening to my child?"

Integrative medicine is, for me, a re-emergence of viewing the patient as a whole person, someone with a rich history, culture and set of beliefs. It is important to involve the patient in the decision-making process in both the treatment of a particular condition and also in living a life that focuses on prevention. When viewed in totality, we may explore botanicals, massage, diet, lifestyle, spirituality, and any other factors that may come into play, based upon that individual's perception and beliefs.

**RM:** *Can you give me an example of how you treat a patient?*

**TLD:** A classic example is the patient who comes into the office complaining of fatigue. She is not sleeping well, has had 2-3 colds over the past winter and just doesn't feel herself. After taking a history and performing a physical exam, appropriate studies are undertaken. Depending upon the individual presentation, we might check for anemia, hypothyroidism and/or do a screen for a number of auto-immune or chronic illnesses. Everything comes back within the normal range. While this is reassuring, the last thing this patient wants to hear is, "Everything looks normal. See you in a year." That is often what happens as conventional physicians are trained to look to rule out physical disease. But between the time the body is healthy and the time the body is sick - there is a period where people just don't feel good. It is after being told, "everything is fine" that a number of folks will go to the acupuncturist, the herbalist or the naturopath in search of answers to the question, "why don't I feel good?"

In my experience, sometimes the person's physical body has become the voice for problems that may be emotional, spiritual or psychological in nature. There is an imbalance, and the only way the imbalance can find expression is through the physical body.

My approach tends to be: do the standard tests, to make sure that there aren't any physical abnormalities that could be causing the symptoms. If the tests come back normal, I tell the patient that the good news is that to the best of my medical knowledge based upon the history, exam and testing, there isn't anything seriously wrong with their body. Then I explain that the mind, body and spirit are all connected and that when there is an imbalance in one - the others are affected. I ask the patient: "Tell me a little about your day. What is your workday like? Tell me why you aren't sleeping well? When is the last time you experienced absolute joy? Can you tell me about the last time you belly-laughed like a five-year-old?" Sometimes these questions get the patient's tears going: "I can't remember the last time I belly-laughed." "I don't think I have ever experienced real joy." Often they are simply overwhelmed with life and all of its responsibilities.

This is why the therapeutic relationship is important. A relationship means we're going to continue to see each other; we're going to work together. Let's figure out a place to start. This may start by getting the patient to sleep better again. If a person has a good night's sleep then the day is going to be a little bit better. There will be a little more energy to take a walk in the evening. A little less need to drink that extra cup of coffee in the afternoon. We might create a 3 week plan to help her sleep better and then have her return and go from there.

Many patients feel overwhelmed so I do not give them a laundry list of things to do. The last thing this individual needs, when they are already completely stressed out, is to have a long list of changes they need to make! For some, this simply contributes to a perceived sense of failure: one more thing they can't accomplish.

One recommendation I make to those feeling overwhelmed is a 20 minute bath by candlelight, listening to soft music, sipping a strong cup of chamomile tea (3-4 teabags to one cup water). They should keep the lights off, TV off, and then, after soaking in the bath, use the candles to light their way to bed. After 14 days of performing this evening ritual, many will report less muscle tension and better sleep.

Exercise is of great benefit for establishing well being. It improves mood, enhances circulation, increases endorphins. But it can be difficult to convince a sleep-deprived mother of three who is running non-stop all day long that she needs to exercise! I generally start with relaxation and sleep and then add stretching, walking, etc.

Other than chamomile, I didn't mention herbs did I?

**RM:** *What are some of your other concerns?*

**TLD:** I am concerned about the widespread, seemingly indiscriminate use of pharmaceuticals, particularly with children. It's staggering when you look at the number of children on Ritalin, the 5-6 billion dollars spent annually on anti-depressants, the millions of people who have had bypass surgery as they eat their hamburgers all the way to the surgeon's office. It's staggering when one thinks that the tobacco companies are now advertising their good deeds as part of their settlement while, at the same time, targeting Hispanic teenagers. Now we have Jose and Josephina Camel in New Mexico having cancer. Diabetes used to be a disease of old age. Old people got Type II diabetes. Now we see it in children 12 or 13 years of age, especially amongst many Native American youth. Is this health care? Are we doing a good job?

At the present time, dietary supplements and botanicals constitute an industry worth more than \$14 billion; but instead of getting to the root of our health problems and promoting wellness, many are still looking for a "magic" pill. Consumers want to find a pill, preferably "natural" that will allow them to be healthy without changing anything in their life. Won't work.

Pharmaceutical companies primarily drive medical research in this country. Herbs are natural substances and cannot be patented. This has led to a dearth of research in this country by herbal manufacturers and a misperception that herbs have no value because they have not been researched. The truth is, however, that a number of them have been researched in Europe and Asia. Some botanicals and dietary supplements have scientific evidence of benefit, others do not. Saw palmetto is a good example. A meta-analysis in the Journal of the American Medical Association and review by the Cochrane Collaboration have both found saw palmetto superior to placebo for the treatment of mild benign prostatic hyperplasia (enlarged prostate). The herb does not work as quickly as the prescription medication generally used for the condition but it has the advantage of fewer side effects. However, if you have a limited income and it is a \$2 copy at the hospital formulary for the prescription and it is \$30 at the health food store for the herb - it isn't really a choice, is it? Saw palmetto is not covered because we view it as complementary and alternative medicine, and there is no pharmaceutical company lobbying for it to be covered.

**RM:** *What about arthritis, which is fairly widespread?*

**TLD:** Glucosamine has been used for more than 30 years in Europe and has been clinically shown to be of benefit for some patients with osteoarthritis. It has two advantages over the medications commonly used for arthritis; it doesn't cause ulcers and it doesn't adversely affect the kidneys. A study published in the Lancet showed that glucosamine may preserve the joint space, slowing the progression of the disease. If this is true, glucosamine will be the first disease modifying agent discovered so far for osteoarthritis. Given the evidence, safety profile and cost - it makes sense for a patient to try it for 2-3 months to see if it helps their symptoms.

**RM:** *Are there other herbs which practitioners might use for specific conditions?*

**TLD:** I like garlic. It has been primarily studied for its benefits in lowering cholesterol, but it was used for centuries as an antimicrobial. It used to be called "Russian penicillin" because it was so valued in poorer countries for its antiseptic properties.

Albert Schweitzer was said to have effectively treated many cases of dysentery with garlic. Louis Pasteur was the first to scientifically document its antiseptic properties. Japanese researchers have found that garlic, even when heated, is quite effective against the E. coli organism associated with food poisoning. The E. coli organism lowering effect and may prevent the progression of atherosclerosis when consumed as part of a heart healthy diet and lifestyle. If you like garlic eat it. "Let thy food be thy medicine and thy medicine be thy food," as Hippocrates rightly said more than 2000 years ago.

**RM:** *What other herbs do you find beneficial?*

**TLD:** I find saw palmetto to be beneficial for enlarged prostate, especially in combination with pygeum (Prunus africanum). Osha (Ligusticum porteri) is an herb that grows in the mountains of New Mexico that is very useful for colds, coughs and minor congestion. Osha syrup is a favorite of mine. Echinacea tincture works great if you take enough of it, early enough, in the course of an upper respiratory infection. Chamomile is a great relaxant for the nerves and the gut, especially in the young and the old. Lemon balm (Melissa officinalis) is also lovely for lifting the mood and inducing a state of calm. Green or black tea works great for diarrhea. Topically applied arnica has eased the pain of many a bruise. Ginger really does work for nausea.

On a deeper note, I believe that gardens themselves are very healing. To be surrounded by the exquisite beauty of nature is to experience a healing of the soul. Joseph Campbell said that it is in the garden that wonders are revealed. So true. The garden is one place where the sacred is made visible. We have the power within us, just like the seed, to grow.



A former English teacher, **Russ Mason, M.S.** is a native of Webster, New York and is a regular contributor to Alternative & Complementary Therapies. He is also Senior Editor for Nature's Wisdom Magazine.