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EDITORIAL

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Keeping an open mind about functional medicine

Considering the controversy surrounding functional medicine, you may be wondering why *JFP* published an article about it last month.¹ David Gorski, MD, PhD, FACS, a vocal critic of functional medicine, commented: “Functional medicine. It sounds so ... scientific and reasonable. It’s anything but. In fact, functional medicine combines the worst features of conventional medicine with a heapin’ helpin’ of quackery.”² On its website, however, The Institute for Functional Medicine claims that “functional medicine determines how and why illness occurs and restores health by addressing the root causes of disease for each individual.”³

I suspect the truth lies somewhere in between.

Because functional medicine has gained a certain degree of popularity, I felt it was important for family physicians and other primary care clinicians to know enough about this alternative healing method to discuss it with patients who express interest.

Does functional medicine combine “the worst features of conventional medicine with a heapin’ helpin’ of quackery”? Or is it still in its infancy and does it deserve a wait-and-see approach?

In their review article in *JFP*, Orlando and colleagues tell us there are 7 defining characteristics of functional medicine.¹ It is patient centered rather than disease centered, uses a “systems biology” approach, considers the dynamic balance of gene-environment interactions, is personalized based on biochemical individuality, promotes organ reserve and sustained health span, sees health as a positive vitality (not merely the absence of disease), and focuses on function rather than pathology.

Most of these statements about functional medicine apply to traditional family medicine. The clinical approach stressing lifestyle changes is mainstream, not unique. The focus on digestion and the microbiome as an important determinant of health is based on interesting basic science studies and associations noted between certain microbiome profiles and diseases.

But association is not causation. So far there is scant evidence that changing the microbiome results in better health, although some preliminary case series have generated intriguing hypotheses. And there is evidence that probiotics improve some symptoms. Ongoing research into the microbiome and health will, no doubt, be illuminating. We have much to learn.

What does seem unique, but suspect, about functional medicine is its focus on biochemical testing of unproven value and the prescribing of diets and supplements based on the test results. There are no sound scientific studies showing the benefit of this approach.

I suggest you read Orlando et al’s article. Functional medicine is an interesting, mostly unproven, approach to patient care. But I will keep an open mind until we see better research that either does—or doesn’t—support the validity of its practices. **JFP**

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