Anthroposophic medicine

Its nature | its aims | its possibilities
Therapeutic eurythmy (left) is a movement therapy that uses speech, gestures and music. Copper rods or - as here - copper balls can help deepen focus on the movement. Therapeutic painting (right) promotes the conscious appreciation of shapes and colours. Rhythmic massage (far right) stimulates the flow of fluids within the body.

Whole extract of yellow gentian root (left) contains a range of bitter substances known to stimulate the digestion and is used in anthroposophic medicines. For anthroposophic doctors comprehensive physical examination (right) is an essential part of the diagnostic process.

For many people, anthroposophic medicine is a difficult concept. But in fact, it is quite easy to explain. It is an integrative form of medicine, derived from two sources: "material scientific medicine" with its methods and results, on the one hand, and "spiritual scientific" findings on the other. Neither one may be taken in isolation. For an individual is not simply a body, there’s also the psyche and personality to take into account as well. Anthroposophic doctors regard physical and mental existence together with personality as a unit, each element having the capacity to influence the others. One of the fundamental aspects of anthroposophic medicine is to take this into account during diagnosis and therapy.

Nevertheless, it is not an "alternative medicine" – it doesn’t aim to replace conventional medicine. On the contrary – it is based on accepted medical science; it just takes things a step further. Or in other words, anthroposophic medicine makes use of everything that scientific research has revealed to be of benefit to the human being: medical technology, laboratory tests, medication, operations, and intensive care. In addition it assesses the individual as a whole entity, examining the aspects which determine a person's uniqueness according to anthropological norms. For instance, this may include physique and body language, physical flow, handshake, sleeping habits, sensitivity to changes in temperature, breathing and biorhythms. Anthroposophic medicine therefore attempts to include the individuality of the patient, as well as the accepted features of an illness, in the treatment process. For just as each person is unique, so is each treatment – even though some may appear to apply to many people.

Anthroposophic medicine is not pre-determined. It avoids pure routine. Even if the same disease pictures constantly recur, each illness manifests itself differently in each patient – a manifestation inseparable from the uniqueness of the individual. Anthroposophic medicine therefore aims to form a picture of the physical, psychological, and personal circumstances that have paved the way for an illness to take hold. Taking such factors into consideration during diagnosis and therapy and re-applying the process to every new patient, guided by scientific findings, medical experience, personal discernment, and intuition, is fundamental to anthroposophic medicine. Any medicine that ignores the person as an individual cannot claim to be true human medicine.
Anthroposophic medicine differs from other systems

The main difference between anthroposophic medicine and conventional medicine is that it doesn’t only look for the illness in the person, but rather for the person in the illness. The diagnostic procedures and the symptoms observed therein may be identical, but a holistic interpretation can lead to different treatments being recommended, or conventional therapies being supplemented by additional measures.

Medicine based purely on material science is limited to explaining an illness solely on the basis of the laws of physics and chemistry. Anthroposophic medicine is more ambitious. It takes into account additional factors, both general and individual, that may affect the patient’s life, mind, and soul, and their physical manifestation:

• growth, regeneration, microcirculation – expressive of vital energy;
• muscle tone, facial expressions, gestures – expressive of mental state;
• heat distribution, posture, uprightness, gait, mental focus, speech – expressive of spiritual state.

When illness occurs, examination of the above may reveal deviations, imbalances, and extremes – additional diagnostic parameters that need to be considered when selecting a therapy. Anthroposophic medicine also has a different understanding of the role played by the patient in overcoming illness. The patient is not simply a passive recipient of medical skill, but an equal partner with the doctor. After all, nobody can know the patient better than the patient.

Health is produced when the polar extremes of life are held in dynamic balance: waking and sleeping, stillness and movement, joy and sorrow. It results from actively searching out and choosing the path we as individuals take into the world and back into ourselves. There are therefore as many healthy states as there are people in the world. Health is not an end in itself; it simply helps us make the most of our personal and social lives.

During an illness, the patient has the opportunity to recognise the state of imbalance body and soul have reached, to understand this and rectify it. Chronic illness can provide an opportunity to learn new modes of behaviour, to develop further insights and acquire greater maturity. Anthroposophic doctors offer the patient support during this process. They strengthen patient autonomy, recognise patient responsibility, and promote the patient’s right to involvement in the selection of an appropriate therapy, while strengthening the patient’s own resolve to remain healthy.

Therapeutic speech (left) facilitates deeper breathing and improves the correlation of breathing and pulse. This has a stabilising and health-giving effect on cardiac rhythms and the entire circulation. External treatments such as compresses (right), poultices and baths stimulate the body’s vital functions: breathing, circulation, digestion, metabolism, heat production and distribution.

Verbascum, common mullein. Flowers are made into tea and used to ease coughs and loosen catarrh caused by inflammations of the respiratory tract.
Technology also has its place

In the diagnosis of an illness, anthroposophic doctors will use all the procedures offered by conventional medicine. Nevertheless, when it comes to medical aids, they prefer initially to rely on their own senses. They examine the individual from top to toe, observing body language, expressions, and gestures, the patient’s handshake, gait, posture – in fact, their entire appearance. They feel whether skin and extremities are warm or cold, clammy or dry to the touch, and they also feel and listen to the body. They listen to the patient’s own estimation of his or her well-being and mental health, and assess how strong the patient’s will to live is – now and in reference to past personal history.

Only then does the question arise whether or not a technical procedure might aid diagnosis. The central issue is always: what new information might such an investigation reveal and what would be the therapeutic consequence? Is such a step even relevant for this particular patient? Medical technology is not used as a matter of course, but only when it could bring recognisable benefits for the patient. Unnecessary investigations are therefore avoided, meaning anthroposophic doctors work in a particularly cost-conscious manner. Nevertheless, whenever a technical method is considered appropriate, anthroposophic doctors are just as willing to apply modern technology for the good of the patient.

The therapeutic spectrum

On the one hand, anthroposophic medicine uses procedures that require passive acceptance on the part of the patient; these are supplemented, however, by procedures demanding the patient’s active involvement. Medical procedures such as operations and the allopathic drugs of conventional medicine make few active demands of patients. Artistic therapies such as therapeutic speech, music, painting, sculpture, and therapeutic eurythmy, discussion therapy (psychotherapy, biographical counselling), nutrition, movement, physiotherapy and relaxation techniques on the other hand, depend entirely on the patient getting involved.

Treatment with drugs is partly based on dosing with naturally based anthroposophic medicines, the composition of which is determined by the typical features of an illness. Substances tailored to the patient’s unique characteristics are also administered. Frequently these are homeopathic/other medicines designed to stimulate the organism and its powers of self-healing.

Rewarding and challenging

Patients used to high tech medicine often find the intensive personal attention they receive from an anthroposophic doctor stimulating. During consultation, they experience the very respect and interest they are seeking as patients. Moreover, not only may they take part in the various therapeutic procedures, they are actively encouraged to do so. Neither is the doctor’s interested questioning of the patient during an appointment superficial; it is indeed one of the essential tools of his trade. In order to treat a patient satisfactorily, the doctor must gain a thorough understanding of the individual in all his or her complexity. For anthroposophic doctors, being able to exploit the whole range of medical procedures...
dures – conventional and unconventional – in the treatment of a patient is a rewarding challenge. They regard the unrestricted choice of therapy as a valuable and indispensable possession.

Modern medicine needs a pluralistic approach

If the perception of what constitutes health and illness differs from person to person, the range of diagnosis and therapy needs to accommodate these variations. The more specific the methods, the better equipped they are to deal with the peculiarities and needs of individual cases. Today’s pluralistic society demands methodological variety. Individuals should be able to opt for the medicine that suits them best.

Despite this, modern medicine is generally dominated by a one-sided materialistic school of thought, which assumes that the human organism can be explained away entirely in terms of the laws of physics and chemistry. This therefore means that “conventional medicine” only addresses the material aspect of human existence – everything immaterial or subjective is systematically excluded. Such reductionist medical doctrine is not qualified to make general pronouncements about what may right or wrong, particularly with reference to areas which it has no intention of researching. It therefore remains the state’s responsibility to formulate medical laws and guidelines which reflect the changing need of the population for a range of medical methodologies. The state should not be expected to sit in judgement over science!

Anthroposophic drugs

Drug therapy within anthroposophic medicine is based on the ancient principle: as little as possible and only as necessary. In cases of acutely severe and life-threatening illness, the use of allopathic drugs is usually unavoidable. However, whenever possible, symptoms are not suppressed; instead the intention is to activate powers of self-healing with the aid of homeopathic and otherwise produced anthroposophic drugs, and to stimulate the body into finding its own natural rhythm once more.

During treatment, anthroposophic doctors try to observe what special stimuli the organism could require to make a full recovery. For instance, bitter substances from the root of the yellow gentian or chicory stimulate the production of digestive juices and promote intestinal movement. Essential oils with warming properties extracted from plants of the labiatae genus such as lavender or rosemary can promote blood circulation and help ease muscular tension.

Additional substances tailored to the illness in question are also used: their composition is based on the general features of the disease picture. These include both whole plant extract preparations and those of mineral or animal origin.

Which substance a doctor selects, whether as whole extract or homeopathic concentration, depends on the type and course of the illness, the symptoms, pains, length of treatment, and the patient’s general condition. It is important to note that, unlike in allopathy, the patient does not have to take the medication as prescribed; they can take it as they feel necessary. Under extreme heat metals in a vacuum are condensed into mirrors (left). Pure gold produces a gold mirror, which is then scraped from the side of the glass vessel to be used as powder in the production of medicines (right).
The various laboratory findings (left) are documented together with all other examination results in the medical record (right). Anthroposophic doctors don’t simply interpret the results unidimensionally as deviations from a norm, but instead regard them within the context of the body’s own dynamic.

The leaves, along with vine leaves, are made into tablets that are used in the treatment of liver complaints.

of illness, patient strength, age, but above all the patient’s internal and external activity levels.

Anthroposophic drugs are produced to pharmacopeial standards of quality and wherever available to specific national, European and international pharmacopoeias.

Anthroposophic medicine’s aim of understanding both patient and illness therefore also demands a pluralistic, holistic approach to drug therapy.

Anthroposophic medicine is modern

What makes anthroposophic medicine so contemporary is that it takes the whole person into account. These days, patients don’t want to be seen merely as an illness, but as a person with an illness.

Anthroposophic medicine continues to develop in pace with medical progress. It regularly embraces new issues and trends, searching out the means to reflect these latest interpretations of illness and health. Over the last few decades, for instance, anthroposophic doctors have developed an internationally recognised therapy programme for addicts. As soon as the benefit of a new diagnostic or therapeutic procedure has been proven, it is accepted and integrated into the range of medical options.

Anthroposophic medicine also pursues its own scientific research. Within conventional science-based medicine, the experience of doctors in the field is more often than not overridden by methodology. This is the precondition for randomised (two groups divided at random), placebo-controlled (compared with a pseudo drug), double blind trials (neither doctor nor patient knows who is taking the actual drug and who the placebo). Such trials replace the consultation-based doctor-patient relationship with generalised, experimental and anonymous situations, entirely at odds with routine therapeutic reality.

In proving the efficacy of their therapies, anthroposophic scientists therefore strive to employ new scientific methods and develop them still further, enabling anthroposophic treatment, with its many approaches, to be demonstrated in day to day practice. Anthroposophic medicine is constantly on the move – yet another reason why it’s so contemporary.

The training of anthroposophic doctors

Every anthroposophic doctor completes a standard conventional medical training. Following a degree in medicine, the doctor is licensed by the appropriate governing body and then undergoes specialist training. That’s why you’ll find anthroposophic doctors in both general practice and casualty, as well as in all the major medical disciplines: from surgery (operations), pediatrics (children), internal medicine, cardiology (heart), endocrinology (hormones), gastroenterology (digestive tract), ophthalmology (eyes), otolaryngology (ear, nose,
and thoracic oncology (cancer), gynaecology (women), orthopaedics (musculoskeletal system) to neurology (nervous system) and psychiatry (mind).

In addition to their chosen specialism, doctors then complete a minimum of three years study focusing on the main emphases of anthroposophic medicine. Training centres are located at anthroposophic clinics in Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Sweden and Switzerland. Practical experience in this alternative diagnostic and therapeutic approach to patient care is gained through work experience in the anthroposophic practices of other doctors, or in the doctor's own practice under the supervision of mentors.

Various specialist schools in Germany and Switzerland offer training courses. In addition, postgraduate courses are regularly held for those doctors who have already qualified in anthroposophic medicine. The latest scientific findings and therapeutic developments are presented and discussed within working groups and at national or international conferences, where anthroposophic attitudes to current medical issues are also worked out.

Lectureships or professorships in anthroposophic medicine currently exist at the universities of San Francisco (USA), Hamburg (Germany) and Berne (Switzerland). Furthermore introductory lectures on anthroposophic medicine are included in the syllabi of many universities in Europe and elsewhere.

Wherever possible, anthroposophic doctors are fully integrated in the health service of an individual country. Anthroposophic medicine is recognised by the public health services of Austria, Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Great Britain, Switzerland, and the Netherlands. There are also many anthroposophic doctors and therapists in these countries, as well as in Denmark and Spain, who offer their services privately.

The origins of anthroposophic medicine

Anthroposophic medicine has been around for almost a hundred years. Dr. Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925), founder of the anthroposophic school of thought, developed the medicine's integrative concept with Dr. Ita Wegman (1876-1945). Both believed it vital that anthroposophic doctors remain abreast of the latest scientific findings. With this in mind, their aim was to supplement conventional medical practice with the spiritual science aspects of anthroposophy.

The term “anthroposophy” is made up of two Greek words “anthropos”, translated: man, and “sophia”, translated: wisdom. This puts the emphasis on the individual and a knowledge of self – an approach that extends to medicine as well.

As early as 1921, the first modest clinics dedicated to the application of this innovative medical approach opened in Arlesheim, near Basle (Switzerland), and in Stuttgart (Germany). From these small...
Belladonna, deadly nightshade. Whole plant extracts ease spasms and repel inflammation.

beginnings, anthroposophic medicine has continued to grow, develop and change over the decades.

**Anthroposophic medicine is international**

Anthroposophic medicine is practised in over 80 countries around the world: in Cape Town and Helsinki, Moscow and Los Angeles, Hamburg and Manila. Over the years hospitals, sanatoria, and other clinical institutions dedicated to anthroposophic medicine have opened in Brazil, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Sweden, and Switzerland.

Furthermore, there are numerous practices and independent therapeutic institutes worldwide, where doctors and therapists specialising in various disciplines work together. In addition more than 370 institutes exist in 26 European and 14 further countries which operate according to their own orthopaedagogical and sociological concepts.

Branch and sales offices of manufacturers of anthroposophic drugs exist in most European countries, as well as in North and South America, Russia, South Africa, Egypt, Japan, Australia and New Zealand.

**Legal status within the European Union**

A European Union guideline concerning anthroposophic medicine has yet to be developed. Efforts are underway, however, to draft a guideline or integrate anthroposophic medicine into existing guidelines.

In six European member states – Austria, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Great Britain, and Italy – and in Switzerland, anthroposophic drugs have at least been awarded formal recognition and a legal foundation within one medical law. Further legal initiatives are in progress, for instance, in the Netherlands, Belgium, and Sweden.

The European Parliament’s Collins Resolution, dating from 29th of May 1997, ‘on the status of non-conventional medicines’, specifically mentions anthroposophic medicine, along with seven other unconventional schools of therapy. Resolution 1206 (1999) of the Council of Europe – ‘A European approach to non-conventional medicines’ – also mentions anthroposophic medicine in document 8435 as one of the most important forms of complementary therapy.

Never was anthroposophic medicine more necessary!

In an age when increasing emphasis is being placed on individual responsibility for health, any medicine that approaches this task methodically and seriously is a social necessity.

In an age which, despite the pluralistic nature of society, is showing an increasing tendency towards wholesale generalisation and standardisation, the need for a medicine that offers a range of specific holistic options and places the uniqueness of the individual at its centre is all the more urgent. A medicine which involves patients in the decision-making process: which therapeutic approach is likely to suit them best when overcoming an illness, which will be seen as an opportunity for self-development.

Never was anthroposophic medicine more contemporary or necessary than it is today!