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Søren Ventegodt, Isack Kandel, and Joav Merrick (10 March 2005)

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Medicine has gone astray - we must reverse the alienation now

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EDITOR--- Talking to the patient is the issue in the commentary by Sandra J Tanenbaum from the School of Public Health at Ohio State University (1). In the old days - and we do not really have to go all the way back to Hippocrates, although it definitely also was his style - medicine was about healing the patient. During the last century we have seen a dramatic shift from cure towards repair, palliative care and sheer removal of symptoms.

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This shift is much deeper and more dramatic than it looks at first glance. We in the medical profession have left healing the person by instead fighting the symptom. Medicine has gone from focusing on the wholeness to focusing on the part, from working with the existence of the patient to working on local body tissues. The holistic approach has disappeared.

We have accordingly shifted from using ourselves as physicians to using tools - mostly drugs, surgery, and radioactivity. An extreme expertise in diagnostics has given us so much information that we have drowned our common sense and our contact with the patient in data. Medicine has become de-humanized. Our physicians have lost, in this process dressed up as scientific progress, the ability to heal the patient. That is really a bad and negative direction.

WHERE SHOULD WE GO NOW? WHERE IS THE DIRECTION?

So what should we do about it? The answer is really simple. Get the training of the art of healing the existence back into the curriculum of the physician. Let medical students develop as persons until they are able to love (or some would prefer the word care), to win trust of the patient, to give full and rich holding and then take the patient into the healing process, often sparing the patient the use of drugs or surgery with often dramatic side effects.

Teach and allow the students, under supervision, to get close or

intimate (professionally) with the patient physically, emotionally and spiritual, using all their natural abilities for helping and supporting: touch, conversation and philosophical discussions on the patient's perspective of life and health. The medicine that the old village family physician practiced, but all forgotten in the world of technology and unpersonal care. We believe that this shift has been one of the reasons, why the public have chosen to go to alternative care.

In Denmark we have now started the Nordic School of Holistic Health, a training site for "old fashioned" simple healing of the patient. It looks much more difficult - arduous in fact - in the beginning than using drugs. But as soon as the medical student, physician, or nurse gets the idea, it becomes a lot easier. And one day it will seem the most natural thing in the world. Holistic existential healing - the style of Hippocrates and two millenniums of physicians after him - is back in town and it is really simple. Because, as Aaron Antonovsky (2,3) and many more have noticed, salutogenesis, healing oneself by reversing the path of pathogenesis, is a natural and inborn talent in all human beings. Once you understand to cooperate with it, helping your patients becomes a lot easier.

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