

New Indo-US partnership in Ayurveda

Dear Sir,

I recently had the privilege of visiting India for the first time, as part of a 7-member delegation invited by the Department of Ayurveda, Yoga, Unani, Siddha and Homeopathy (AYUSH), of the Government of India's, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, under their new program for international cooperation,^[1] to learn about Ayurvedic Medicine. The journey was very important to me, both personally and professionally, because it has given me a new, much needed perspective on activities underway in India in Complementary and Integrative Medicine.

The US delegation was composed of Navin Shah, a urologist in the US intimately involved in US-Indo medical organizations, and six leaders of Complementary and Integrative Medicine programs at distinguished academic

medical centers in the United States.^[2] The goal of the visit was to provide the delegation with an overview of the principles and philosophy of Ayurvedic medicine, and the best evidence available for the efficacy of selected medicinal plants, herbs, and various treatment modalities. The intent of the Indian government was that members of the delegation would become informed about the evidence-base for Ayurveda and spearhead efforts to incorporate principles of Ayurvedic medicine into the medical curricula at their institutions, and throughout the US. To a large extent, this initial visit did quite a lot to inform the delegation. However, more work is to be done to increase the evidence-base for Ayurvedic approaches and considerable effort is still needed to identify key elements that should be part of a medical curriculum in the US.

One of the realities that struck me was the sense that a chasm currently exists between Ayurveda practitioners and allopathic physicians, which impedes the progress toward a full integration. Some Ayurveda practitioners question why evidence should be provided for therapies that have been practiced for thousands of years. On the other hand, some allopathically trained clinicians are so skeptical of Ayurvedic approaches that they refuse to even submit any therapies to scientific testing and rigor. My feeling is that this chasm can be bridged with greater cooperation across disciplines, as for example suggested by Vaidya.^[3] To balance the conventional scientists already teaching basic sciences in Ayurveda colleges, Ayurveda practitioners should be participating in clinical teaching in allopathic schools. These interactions will provide valuable experience for integrating curricular modules across disciplines.

With regard to joint US-Indo efforts,^[2] I feel there is a great opportunity to enhance cooperation between the countries by creating collaborations in training and education. The Government of India should enable faculty to take advantage of opportunities at US academic medical centers. For example, at my institution, Georgetown University School of Medicine, our MS degree in Physiology/Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) program might allocate positions for highly qualified Ayurveda practitioners who wish to pursue graduate training in a science-oriented CAM graduate program. Similar opportunities may also be possible at the residency and fellowship programs, where conventional MDs can participate in the Integrative Medicine Graduate Medical Education programs (University of Arizona) or the 2-year program in Clinical Research (Albert Einstein College of Medicine).

In addition, there is currently considerable interest at US medical schools in incorporating elements of mind–body medicine and mindfulness into the medical curriculum

as a way to foster self-awareness and increase physician resilience, while decreasing student and faculty burnout. It seems to me that US educators could learn from the experience in Ayurveda and Yoga colleges such as Swami Vivekananda Yoga Anusandhana Samsthana (SVYASA)^[4] as to how yoga and meditation can be integrated seamlessly into the medical curriculum. All these suggestions can help position Ayurveda education on the global platform of interprofessional CAM education.

To summarize these initial reflections, which focus mostly on education, I found India to be an intriguing place full of contrasts. There are the time-honored, ancient traditions that unfold in a deliberate and unhurried pace, and there is the bustling energy and excitement of an emerging economy and world power. Patience and impatience exist simultaneously. And so it is with Ayurveda and conventional medicine. Both are present in India, and learning to extract the best of both in an Integrative Medicine approach^[5] will lead to new and exciting possibilities.

Aviad Haramati

*Professor, Department of Physiology and Biophysics,
Georgetown University School of Medicine.
E-mail: haramati@georgetown.edu*

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