

GALEN AND WELLBEING: WHOLE PERSON CARE

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In affluent Western countries today, in spite of massive improvements in healthcare and the control of disease, many people feel unfulfilled, unhappy or un-well¹. They often look for non-medical interventions that might improve their wellbeing, and they do not have to look hard for advice. There are many books, websites, apps and practitioners who are keen to take their money and provide them with a 'fix' that will improve their wellbeing. Most of these 'fixes' are based on a single aspect of human behaviour, such as taking up a specific type of diet, exercise, or meditative practice². Many of these recommended approaches have little or no evidence to back up the extravagant claims made about their abilities to improve people's health and wellbeing.

Another aspect of the recent cultural development of searching for ways of improving individual health and wellbeing in the Western world has been a move to Eastern approaches. Arguably, this started with the introduction of techniques such as acupuncture, Tai Chi, and meditative approaches being transferred from Eastern into Western medicine. Currently, those of us in the West seem particularly fascinated by Buddhism-based mindfulness approaches and Chinese mind-body interventions³. Furthermore, there are many practitioners of Eastern medical systems, such as traditional Chinese medicine or Indian Ayurveda working in the West. Widespread though these practices are, they may not resonate with many Western people, as there is no cultural or historical background for them in the Western Judaeo—Christian world.

We believe that the ancient Greek doctor Galen, who practised and wrote many medical books in Rome in the 2nd century AD, provides us with a Western-based approach to the improvement of health and wellbeing that could be of great value to individuals and communities today. Furthermore, his approach differs in important ways from most of those being pursued today. What follows is based on our study (led by John Wilkins) of one book in particular, Galen's treatise 'On Maintaining Good Health'⁴. Galen drew an important distinction between the prevention of disease (which is the focus of this book) and the treatment of disease. He regarded prevention as the responsibility of the individual, whilst he saw disease treatment as the province of the medical profession.

Galen believed that we could do much to prevent disease and illness by living 'according to nature' and by adhering to certain principles, which are sometimes called Galen's 'necessary activities'. Here is our summary of his account of these six necessary activities.

- *Food and drink*: To consider food and drink as vital to good health; to consume only those things that promote our strength, longevity and nourishment.
- *Exercise and rest*: To examine which exercises are most suitable for us; to commit to a moderate form of daily exercise, as appropriate to our specific age and condition.
- *Sleep*: To allow a period of calm for the transition between activity and sleep; not to get too much or too little sleep.
- *Mental state*: To recognise the damaging effects that negative mental states such as anger or resentment have on the body; to be careful about what one 'consumes' mentally; to find ways to reduce stress
- *Air and environment*: to ensure, as far as possible, that our environment, both at home and at work, is conducive to our health and wellbeing; to try to have regular times outdoors in fresh air, whatever your circumstances.
- *Balance*: To pursue a life which provides a balanced combination of these activities that is appropriate for our individual constitution.

Key aspects of Galen's approach that differ from most current advice include individualisation, integration of many different practices, and balance. For example, he did not think that diet or exercise alone were enough to safeguard health or that any specific diet or form of exercise was right for everyone. He recommended adhering to, and integrating, all of the six activities and thought that each individual had to find the regime that suited their individual constitution. Galen recognised that what was right for any one

individual might not be right for another, and that what is right for each of us changes during our lifetime. He recommended 'listening to our bodies' to find what was right for us at each stage of our lives and to find the right combination of activities. And 'balance' was critical to his thinking: each of us needs to find the right mix, balance and overall lifestyle approach that is right for us. Other aspects of Galen's advice which differ to some degree from most modern lifestyle approaches include his emphasis on the importance of the environment, as well as sleep and mental health. His emphasis on ensuring that we get out into the natural environment each day, on reflection about our daily activities before going to sleep, and on avoiding negative mental states can provide a valuable alternative to Eastern meditative practices. Galen and other ancient medical writers also recognised the importance of interpersonal and communal relationships, which is something that often seems absent from modern discussions of health and wellbeing which is often focused on 'me' taken in isolation from other people.

We are pursuing a number of activities to explore the applicability of Galen's approach for the improvement of individual health and wellbeing today. We think that the introduction of this ancient tradition of Western cultural thinking about health and wellbeing may be of great value to modern Western societies. ■

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