

Daring to Change: Exploring Spiritual Dimensions of Modern Medicine

By Amos M. Yinnon MD

Lambert Academic Publishing, 2014

IMAJ 2015; 17: 791–792

It must be stated at the outset that Prof. Yinnon is the Chairman of Medicine at Shaare Zedek Medical Center, Jerusalem and that the author of this review serves as Director-General of Shaare Zedek. Prof. Yinnon is a well-trained and experienced Internal and Infectious Diseases specialist and one of the best clinicians I have come across in my career.

Writing a review of Professor Yinnon's book is no simple task as the subject matter is unique and may well raise eyebrows among those who consider themselves super rationalists.

To understand the author's views on the place of spirituality in modern medicine, views that comprise the essence of this book, suffice it to quote a few sentences from his introduction: "There is a dimension of life and medicine beyond the biology, psychology and social networking of man. One may call this dimension a person's value system or spirituality ... It is the purpose of this work to demonstrate this dimension, both in theory and practice." The author believes that "any individual's life's events are not random; they result from an interaction between a person's unique inner life and forces on the one hand and outside events on the other."

Since the book is intended for both physicians and the general public, Professor Yinnon recounts the stories of 16 patients (and frequently, also of their families) in clear language, explaining the clinical factors in layman's terms. In each of these case reports the author identifies a spiritual dimension, sometimes underlying the clinical problem and sometimes itself constituting part of the problem. In each case, pinpointing this dimension and bringing it to their awareness proved ben-



eficial to the patients and/or their caregivers, frequently even contributing to their healing or the alleviation of their pain and suffering.

In many cases, this spiritual dimension stemmed from the religious or cultural background of the patients, Jewish or otherwise, religious or atheist. In the chapter entitled "Disclosure," the author describes his own and his family's gradual adoption of full Jewish observance. Coupled with the fact that Shaare Zedek is located in the heart of Jerusalem, it is natural that most of the spiritual dimensions described are taken from the religious Jewish world; however, clear explanations make this material accessible to the secular non-Jewish reader. The patients themselves were not necessarily religious, but, as stated, all connected well to the spiritual dimension once they were made aware of it by Professor Yinnon, who was either their main treating physician or a consultant.

The following (case number 3) exemplifies how, having ensured the optimal conventional treatment, the author goes on to identify the additional element – the "spiritual" aspect – which he feels enables a physician to make an extra contribution to the wellbeing of the patient and/or his family.

An 80 year old patient, father of seven, was brought to the Department of Emergency Medicine suffering from pneumonia, a year after sustaining a stroke which had left him hemiplegic and with motor aphasia. As the prognosis appeared poor, a discussion was held with the children, some of them ultra-Orthodox and some totally secular. They could not reach agreement regarding connection to a life support system. In the absence of an advanced directive, and following deterioration in his condition, the patient was intubated by the resident on night shift duty. The author describes in detail what every active clinician frequently faces: the family's disarray, the disagreements and the mutual blame for prolonging what seemed to some of the family a totally futile situation causing unnecessary suffering. Since all the family members were devoted and spent much time at the bedside of their unconscious father, the chief physician met with them all together, listened to the life story of the religiously observant father, and made the family aware of the fact that, holding as they did an entire spectrum of attitudes to end-of-life care, it would have been almost impossible for them to reach a joint conclusion and the wishes of the father in such a situation were unknown. However, it seemed in his opinion that the father was subconsciously presenting his children with a farewell present, provid-

ing time and a situation for them to come together, to talk and hopefully to defuse old tensions in order to let them honor their father. After this 15 minute meeting, the family left the office subdued, some with tears in their eyes and no further friction was observed among family members during the week until their father died. The author concludes “Whereas biological medicine can be futile ... referral to the inner dimension can *never* be futile.”

Professor Yinnon’s extra-dimensional approach may be considered by some readers to be fanciful or irrelevant. I support

the view that holistic and truly integrative medicine calls for a doctor-patient relationship that goes beyond the bio-psychosocial arena, and that when a physician tries to identify spiritual dimensions in the background of the patient’s illness, and brings these dimensions to the awareness of the patient and his family, he or she does so to everyone’s benefit.

I believe that this book is of interest to the general public and to every practicing doctor. I congratulate the author on his courage as a physician and academician in illuminating an aspect of treatment that

most medical professionals do not sense or in whose existence they do not believe. The sixteen cases presented in this lucid and accessible text give excellent support to Prof. Yinnon’s conviction that integrating the “dry” clinical facts with the spiritual dimension present in all of us, irrespective of religion or culture, opens a major additional channel of caring for patients and their loved ones.

Yonatan Halevy MD

Shaare Zedek Medical Center
[halevy@szmc.org.il]