

Vitalism Key to Contemporary Health Care Policy

THE TIME IS NOW

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Perhaps the tipping point came when companies like GM and Starbucks realized they were spending more on health insurance than steel and coffee beans, respectively. Or maybe it was when our government discovered half of all personal bankruptcies are caused by medical bills. It could also have come when the [Institute of Medicine](#) told us 100,000 Americans die every year from in-hospital medical errors.

However it happened, the concepts of wellness and prevention as viable health care approaches have finally captured the nation's attention. Indeed, President Obama's new health care plan calls for a significant increase in prevention and wellness care, in part to mitigate the staggering \$1.7 trillion per year spent caring for the one in three Americans with chronic diseases.

It's cause for celebration; the trend has finally turned in favor of the chiropractic approach to health! Or has it? Although President Obama and Vice President Biden impressively point to sidewalks, biking trails and local grocery stores with fresh fruit and vegetables as part of their health care plan, the main drivers are still decreasing costs and increasing access. So far, the administration is talking largely to members of the medical profession to solve a problem that, at least in part, it helped cause.

What's really needed is a strong philosophical framework for understanding optimal health and function. Without that, the whole wellness movement is at risk of becoming a passing fad at best, and at worst, just an excuse for aggressive cost-cutting.

Life University believes a contemporary approach to vitalism could provide the right framework and truly revolutionize our system of health care. That's why we recently brought together some of the world's most renowned philosophers, clinicians and scholars for Vis Medicatrix Naturae: Stewardship of the Source of Health, the inaugural event of the Lifesource Octagon, a Center for Infinite Thinking. Speakers talked about the new vitalism and its role in their professions, and explored the implications for significant change in policy, practice, education and research that might be brought about with a truly vitalistic approach to national health care.

Not Your Grandfather's Vitalism

Keep an open mind for a minute. The historical concept of vitalism proposes the idea of a spirit that animates and operates the body. The goal of this conference was to create a political framework for a new conversation in national health care today. Presenters and attendees focused on the contemporary concept of biological vitalism that sees the body as a self-regulating system.

This diverse group of presenters even aligned over just one weekend of discourse around a shared definition of vitalism: a recognition and respect for the inherent self-maintaining, self-organizing and self-healing ability of the body. They'll use that definition as they work together to prepare a seed

document that will provide a foundation for further conversation and a road map to the next steps in facilitating professional dialogue.

“The conference conversations were really useful in the sense that a full range of different disciplines gave their perspectives on what vitalism is for them,” said Ian Coulter, health consultant at the [RAND Corporation](#), who presented on Defining the Field: A Guide to Requirements and Challenges. “Vitalism is a good paradigm for getting the focus off disease and trauma,” he added. “This perspective is very necessary in the health care policy arena at the moment.”

There is tremendous hunger for new models and, in fact, an entirely new paradigm for helping people get and stay healthy. The public understands our current health care system has failed us. Despite spending more than any other developed nation on health care services, our outcomes lag behind those of many developing nations.

A Time for Chiropractic

Vitalism provides the right framework through which chiropractic can provide a truly meaningful contribution to health care policy and health care reform in a way that’s good for the profession and very good for the public. Conversations about incorporating a vitalistic wellness philosophy in health care are already happening, but chiropractic isn’t at the table. We must step forward as a unified profession and claim our role as experts in helping people achieve peak performance. This is a wholly appropriate role for chiropractic to play, but it won’t come to us as an inheritance. We’re trying to start something at Life to strengthen the shared understanding and influence of all those professions with a connection to natural healing. If that describes you, we invite you to get on board.

Right now, economics are driving the conversation. The [Wellness Council of America](#) says for every dollar invested in wellness, we can realize a \$3 savings in disease care. That’s strong motivation for change. But even stronger motivation is the human cost. The chiropractic voice must ring out loud and clear to provide a strong philosophical underpinning for creation of a new system of health care that is not only more cost effective, but also better for people.

Our nation’s leaders must engage practitioners in looking for ways to support people in achieving health and optimum performance in all areas of their lives: physical, emotional, intellectual, social, spiritual and environmental. Such a sea change in thinking will impact how we build housing communities, structure work environments, distribute national resources, apportion budgets, farm, seek out new sources of energy and even interact with global neighbors. This isn’t pie in the sky but rather a robust endeavor that will require a new sort of intellectual firepower to reinvent the measures of health. Those who lead the movement will figure out how to gauge wellness not in the relief of symptoms, but rather by looking at far more encompassing measures, such as quality of life.

Thought Leadership

Getting our vitalistic philosophy on the national agenda won’t happen in isolation, but by gathering together the best and brightest among those who share an understanding and appreciation for the potential impact of wellness and performance. We can’t shy away from our role as thought leaders, or the controversy to which we’ll be exposed by putting ourselves at the forefront.

Life University is extending itself to engage key decision-makers and thinkers in a professional dialogue. The result of this conference is published proceedings (available at www.life.edu) that

document how members of varied professions are gathering around the concept of vitalism, providing a coherent and clear description of the concept, defining the field, linking it to academics, and identifying some of the future implications of sharing constructive, professional dialogue.

We must continue to expand the conversation both in scope and array of participants; and, most importantly, hold these concepts up to external and objective evaluation. We must embrace objective critique and cooperation if our vitalistic approach to health and peak performance is to capture the attention and respect of national decision-makers.

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