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### **Mixed medicine**

#### ***Doctors combining western medical tradition with traditional Indian medicine are treating patients to the best of both worlds***

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Imagine feeling a continuous stream of oil flowing over your forehead for an entire hour as part of a medical treatment. Sounds strange for most westerners, but this ayurvedic treatment, called Shirodhara, is part of an ancient medical system that dates back over 5,000 years. Shirodhara is used on patients to promote relaxation, or for those with mental imbalances, sleep disturbances, and/or stress disorders. In ayurvedic medicine, treatment is all about creating balance.

"I usually get visited by patients who are well educated in health matters and want to learn more about their own constitution, or improve their diet and lifestyle and prevent future problems," explains Dr. Hemant Gupta, an ayurvedic doctor who has been practising for over 20 years. "There is great interest growing all over the world, and particularly in Southeast Asia, Europe and North America."

Why are people seeking out Ayurveda instead of sticking with the cultural norm? While western medicine tends to isolate and then treat disorders, Ayurveda tries to look at the broader picture, seeing everything as linked, from the tiniest part of the human body to the entire universe. Ayurveda "believes in the intelligence within the minutest particle of nature. The approach to a patient is therefore in harmony with those principles," says Dr. Gupta. If the patient is unbalanced, it may result in illness.

Ayurveda, the primary health system in India, and western biomedicine, the primary system in North America, differ in their view of the body.

"It needs to be emphasized that Ayurveda is very much a science," Dr. Gupta stresses. "The foundation of Ayurveda is based on quantum physics instead of molecules, cells and gross structure.

"More than 1,500 years ago, plastic surgery and other surgeries were performed by ayurvedic surgeons using metal instruments almost identical to the ones that came in vogue in Europe some 150 years ago."

Ayurveda is a Sanskrit word, essentially meaning the science of life and longevity. Dr. Gupta believes that "the ultimate goal is to help a person to process the world in a broader perspective to create love, and to make the world a better place." By having a healthy body and mind, the hope is that patients will have a solid footing when dealing with the stresses of everyday life.

To become an ayurvedic doctor, Dr. Gupta completed a five-year undergraduate degree, followed by a post-graduate degree in ayurvedic studies in India in 1987. His schooling covered medicine and surgery, internal medicine, and natural medicine.

Ayurveda is picking up steam in Canada, and Dr. Gupta hopes to create a dialogue between biomedical doctors and ayurvedic doctors.

"Ayurvedic doctors don't ask patients to stop taking medications," says Dr. Gupta. Instead, he hopes that the systems will be complimentary. For example, if someone has painful digestion problems, that person may be prescribed painkillers by a family doctor. Yet painkillers, while effective at lessening the discomfort, could cause more stomach sensitivity. If an ayurvedic doctor knows this, the patient's diet can be altered to help alleviate drug side-effects. By sharing information between health providers, there is a reduced risk of creating further imbalances.

Dr. Gupta explains that without a healthy body and mind, a person can "fall into patterns of negativity that ultimately lead to ill health."

"More and more people are interested," says Dr. Shirish Nathawani, a family physician in St. John's, Newfoundland. "I believe that they need each other to make themselves complete."

Dr. Nathawani, who earned his medical degree from the University of Glasgow in Scotland, learned about Ayurveda when his daughter became interested in alternative healing. He saw benefits within both systems, and ultimately hopes that Ayurveda and western medicine will merge, "opening up new realms of healing modes."

Even several insurance companies are providing access to this alternative system.

"Depending upon individual health plans, several insurance companies now cover Ayurveda. Blue Cross, Sun Life, Johnson and Johnson, and Desjardins are some of them," notes Dr. Gupta.

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