

SPEECH BY ROBERT VERKERK PhD

SUPERJAM 2011

Honourable guests, ladies and gentlemen, it is with huge pleasure that I've been asked to say a few words about the purpose of tonight's amazing event put on by The Sunflower Jam charity.

Cancer is a subject very close to most of our hearts, and doing everything we possibly can for children with cancer is one of those ultimate no-brainers. But for more and more people, bombarding our kids with radiation and chemotherapy drugs—while doing little else—is simply not enough.

Instead, they are turning—wait for it—to: patient-centred, integrated and sustainable healthcare. Notice how I'm avoiding the use of the word alternative.

It may sound a bit of a mouthful, but the concept is far from new.

It's been at the heart of some of the longest-lived traditions in medicine, such as Ayurveda and traditional Chinese medicine. These traditions—very much alive and well today—and in a state of continuous evolution—have been around for well over 4 thousand years.

But we're not talking here about going backwards. We're talking about moving forward; bringing the very best of what we know to those who are most vulnerable in our society, and those who will inherit from us whatever it is that we leave behind.

The concept of patient-centred, integrated medicine might be accepted in principle by more and more healthcare providers. But in practice, its delivery often falls short. And that's not what you want if it's *your* child who has cancer, and you are one of those who supports this much broader, more inclusive approach to healthcare.

This is what the Sunflower Jam charity is all about. Monies raised tonight will be used to help make this kind of integrated healthcare become a reality for more kids with cancer at Great Ormond Street Hospital, and beyond.

But the kind of paradigm shift that so many of us feel is necessary—and of course is needed not just in healthcare—requires that we review the frame through which we view the world around us.

I'd like to spend a few moments putting into context the kind of reframing I think is necessary:

The International Programme on the State of the Oceans warns us that we should expect mass extinctions of ocean-dwelling species at a level unprecedented in human history. This extinction event will be caused by agricultural fertiliser run-off, high levels of CO₂ absorption and over-fishing—all of which are directly linked to human activity.

At a very much more local level, those of us who are keen gardeners—or farmers—will have noticed the devastation occurring among bee populations. Bees are a vital element in any healthy natural or agricultural ecosystem. Explanations for their mass decline are not simple, and neither is there universal agreement among scientists. But again several factors appear to be working together, all of them linked once again to human activity. They include immune suppression from pesticides, which in turn makes the bees more susceptible to viral pathogens, and electromagnetic radiation from mobile phones and wireless systems. Genetically modified crops probably also play a role, but whichever way we choose to look at it, human activity appears to be at the heart of the problem.

Now, let's take a look at ourselves. As a dynamic biological, biochemical and bio-energetic system, the human body simply cannot be impervious to the ravages we are wreaking on ecological systems around us, upon which we are dependent. The human species has created technology that undeniably assists our understanding of the world around us. It has also been central to the medical advances so many of us have witnessed during our lifetimes.

The problem is this: the allopathic medical model appears relatively helpless in its ability to resolve complex, chronic diseases like cancer and heart disease, the two biggest killers in our society. It has also made little headway with other conditions like anxiety and depression, that prevent so many from achieving a high quality of life.

Our mutual recent experience is confirming time and time again that complex problems can rarely be resolved with a technological 'silver bullet'. Chasing the next patented, new-to-nature drug is looking more and more like chasing rainbows for the sake of corporate, short-term profit.

Where we see the most profound results in healthcare are in places where there is a confluence of our minds, bodies and spirits, in such a way that we are reconnected—not disconnected—from our natural state and our evolutionary heritage.

That's why even the World Health Organization recognises that diet and physical activity—not drugs and technology—are the primary factors that need to be managed if we are to reduce the devastation currently being wrought by the big 5 chronic diseases: cancer, heart disease, diabetes, obesity and osteoporosis, that currently represent the biggest burden on healthcare systems around the world. The WHO also sees these diseases as largely preventable given they are mainly related to environment and behavior and especially nutrition and lifestyle.

To make this shift, honourable guests, ladies and gentlemen, the bedrock of our healthcare system needs radical change. The patient must be seen as a whole person, not just one who needs treatment of a particular part of the body for the relief of a specific symptom of disease. To manage health, we need to do much more than just treat disease. Healthcare providers need to see each of their patients as an individual and whole person, functioning within a wider, but nonetheless quite specific ecological system. Each individual, as well parents and carers in the case of children, must be empowered at all stages of the healthcare process.

Diet and nutrition remain among the most important tools, because they represent that part of the environment with which we have interacted most intimately during the course of our evolutionary history. But, as many have found to their cost, we still have a long way to go.

I hope that today's event will mark the beginning of a sea change in healthcare. We have with us tonight some of the most important players in the UK with the capacity to help bring about the necessary changes, including those in the newly-formed College of Medicine.

But let's remember that none of these changes can occur without your help, and without powerful pressure from the community and from patients. That's why it's so important to have this gig, and

for the wider community to know that this is really something worth shouting about—or at least rock and rolling over.

Before I hand you back to Jeremy [Irons] so we can begin the auction, I'd like to take this opportunity, on behalf of the Sunflower Jam charity and tonight's sponsors, to thank you all for the contributions you have made—or are about to make—financial and otherwise—to help make the rise of this new dawn in healthcare a reality for the majority, not just a privileged minority.

Let's together create something we can be proud to hand over to future generations. Thank you.