The concept of natural in medicine

There is a tendency for the human mind to polarise thoughts and ideas. The concept of 'natural' – what is of nature and the physical world – lies at the core of my beliefs as a naturopathic physician. It does, however, tend to be pitched against science and technology, especially when they are used in a mechanistic or reductionist way. When science is used in its proper sense, as knowledge gained from systematic observation, there should be no dichotomy; it serves our attempts to understand nature.

But, as George Bernard Shaw stated in The Doctors' Dilemma a hundred years ago,
"Science becomes dangerous only when it imagines it has reached its goal"

In 1982, Fritjof Capra wrote:
" Our science and technology are based on the seventeenth-century belief that an understanding of nature implies domination of nature by 'man'……This attitude has produced a technology in which the natural, organic habitat of complex human beings has been replaced by a simplified, synthetic, and prefabricated environment."
(Capra, 1982)

So, setting aside these rather sterile applications of science and technology I want to explore how we can use them to understand the infinite superiority and complexity of nature.

Having grown up on an organic farm, I was able to observe at first hand the superiority of things natural, in terms of plant, animal, and human

health, over the costly chemical aids to plant growth and confrontation of disease that were becoming increasingly prevalent in the immediate post-war years. It was believed that only by pouring chemicals on the land and into livestock would it be possible to feed the nation. My father, and other pioneers of the organic movement, was able to demonstrate that working with nature offered a viable alternative (Newman Turner, 1951).

Why do we prefer things natural?

Why do we increasingly show a preference for things natural? Is the organic food we purchase any better than that pampered and forced, or even mimicked by chemical compounds? We believe that natural foods provide better nourishment for our bodies (and there is now more evidence to suggest that this is so). Why do we gravitate to the countryside or the coast for our recreation? Do we not prefer a Constable landscape to the dimly-lit inner-city streets of an Edward Hopper painting; Monet's water lilies to Andy Warhol's soup cans? Is it because the experience and depictions of nature more readily nourish our souls?

Dr Henry Lindlahr, who was one of the first people to articulate a clear philosophy of naturopathic medicine, summed it up when he wrote:
"That which is normal or natural is in harmonic relation with the life purposes of the individual"
(Lindlahr, 1913)

The supremacy of nature is implicit in the early term 'nature cure,' as a way of living in harmony with our natural environment. It is also implicit in the principle of *vis medicatrix naturae* – the healing power of nature – (attributed to Hippocrates, though he may not have used that actual term in his writings) a fundamental tenet of naturopathic medicine. (The ways

in which we may characterise the *vis* and its relationship to vitalistic concepts will, undoubtedly be a topic for a future symposium)

Natural medicine is based, therefore, on the fact that the body possesses not only the ability to resist disease but inherent mechanisms of recovery and self-regulation. (Newman Turner, 2000) (In using the term 'mechanisms' I may seem to have descended to reductionist thinking, but I will return to this later). In practice, we use modalities more or less as they are found in nature and which are compatible with the curative activity of the body.

Natural is not benign

Many would argue, however, that not all that is natural is benign. That nature is 'red in tooth and claw' (Tennyson, 1850) is a constant theme of modern health policy and media paranoia whenever there is a 'health scare'. Bacteria and viruses are out to get us, the argument goes, and we must rely on increasingly powerful pharmaceuticals to subdue nature and control infectious diseases. But the attempts at the conquest of nature over the past 150 years have not been particularly successful. More than forty years ago Rene Dubos, a professor of microbiology at Rockefeller University, stated that:

"Morbidity rates of infection have not decreased significantly, and in some cases have increased"
(Dubos, 1965)

The suppression of fever, long recognised by naturopaths as an expression of the natural healing response, is now understood to be inappropriate in many circumstances (Matthews, 2010). In a recent paper

in the BMJ, Barlow (2010) reported that the more feverish were patients with pneumonia on admission to hospital the better their chances of survival.

Natural substances taken out of context may also pose threats. The toxicity of active principles of plants used or synthesised in pharmaceuticals is well known. Bruce Ames (1983) found that some natural foods contain mutagens (potential carcinogens) in vitro but high levels of anti-carcinogens in vivo.

Surely, better to trust to the 'natural state' in food and medicine and the wisdom of the body to use it appropriately as only it knows how.

Philosophical and moral issues

There are also philosophical and moral issues about defining the boundaries between natural and artificial life, as Prof Steven Rose points out in his book Lifelines (Rose, 1997). Is it right, for example, to use the technology of life-support when natural function can no longer sustain life? Is it morally acceptable to engineer human genes by inserting them in animals to synthesise clinically desirable products.

Rose also points out that reductionism or a mechanistic approach is necessary for the success of the experimental method but describes it as a "beguiling simplicity" since living systems are not simple. And to return to the use of the term mechanisms, Capra (1982) suggested some years earlier that "a mechanistic view can be justified in that living organisms act like machines anatomically, physiologically, and biochemically but these are no more than organisational models created by nature. ……our

understanding of living things is superficial and does not encompass the underlying processes that make them possible"

Nature in medicine

Most of the world's long-established, indigenous systems of medicine – traditional Chinese medicine, Ayurveda, Unani, Siddha, etc – are based on the close interaction of humans with their environment, both physical and cosmological – mankind as an integral part of the natural world. The fact that these are often derided by the modern scientific community is probably because their metaphysical concepts are more difficult to grasp than the superficial certainties of the reductionist paradigm. (As Voltaire said, "When he that speaks and he that is spoken to, neither of them understands, that is metaphysics")

We may never satisfy the Hawkings and Dawkinses of this world but that need not prevent us from using the tools of technology and the methodology of science, all of which were created by human consciousness and the mind in any case, to help us unravel the infinite mysteries and complexities of the natural world – and what Krishnamurti called 'the inner intimation of things.'

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