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Yoga Therapy Recognized For Treating Heart Disease

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Practicing Hindus and many other devotees of yoga know of the marvelous health benefits of yoga, meditation and eating a low-fat vegetarian diet. Unfortunately, the American government, the health care industry and insurance companies don't. Few people concerned with the nation's health have realized that these practices can help prevent-or at least slow-down-just about every ailment from arthritis to heart disease. Inexplicably, the insurance companies are willing to give out millions of dollars in claims for exorbitant surgery, outrageously priced drugs and expensive cures, when a regime of sensible eating, meditation and yogic exercises could help prevent the problem in the first place. Often, these practices-which haven't, until now, been considered for reimbursement by insurers-could help prevent heart disease whereas an angioplasty can cost \$18,000 and bypass surgery a whopping \$43,000-enough to buy a house in some states! Is it any wonder that health care costs in America are escalating out of the reach of ordinary people?

A recent decision by one of the nation's largest insurance companies, however, shows that things may at last be moving in the right direction. The Mutual of Omaha Companies announced that they have joined with an Omaha hospital in making Omaha one of six planned demonstration sites nationally for a program for reversing severe coronary heart disease. In fact, Mutual of Omaha is the first insurer nationwide to sponsor the program, contributing \$100,000 to Immanuel Medical Center to cover start-up costs for a Reversal Program demonstration site to be located in the hospital. The Reversal Program is the creation of Dr. Dean Ornish, president and director of the Preventive Medicine Research Institute in Sausalito, California. This program formulated by Dr. Ornish, who is a long-time follower of

Swami Satchidananda, is the only one scientifically proven to reverse heart disease without drugs or surgery. It advocates lifestyle changes which include a low fat vegetarian diet, meditation and yoga. The Reversal Program, which began in mid-October, is for people at high risk for heart disease or who have had heart attacks, bypass surgery or angioplasty. It includes three, four-hour sessions per week for 12 weeks. Participants eat a vegetarian diet which is low in fat and cholesterol; exercise moderately; manage their stress through techniques which include meditation; and attend a support group. The three-month program is followed by a 40-week maintenance program that includes weekly support group meetings. The individual cost is approximately \$3,500, with an additional \$400 for the maintenance program. The good news is that, in addition to the sponsorship, Mutual of Omaha will cover the cost of the program for its policyholders who participate. Dr. Ken McDonough, senior vice-president and corporate medical director at Mutual of Omaha, explains: "We have taken this program out of the realm of experimental procedures. For those policyowners who qualify for the program at any of the demonstration sites, we will provide benefits. We hope this will cause other insurers to rethink their approach to such non-invasive programs of treatment."

Charles J. Marr, president and chief executive officer of Immanuel Medical Center puts this decision into perspective: "This signals the future approach of health care, helping us move from being health care procedurists to true health care providers. The Reversal Program not only dramatically improves the lives of those individuals who participate, but as an alternative to traditional coronary heart disease interventions, it could potentially save as much as \$58,000 per patient."

Dr. Dean Ornish, who is the author of several books, wrote about the benefits of yoga, meditation and a low-fat vegetarian diet in his best-seller, *Stress, Diet and Your Heart: Dr. Dean Ornish's Program for Reversing Heart Disease*. His new book, *Eat More, Weigh Less* (Harper Collins) is once again a major best-seller. In this he shows people who are exasperated by starvation diets how simple it is to lose weight while eating plenty of delicious, satisfying vegetarian meals and doing moderate exercises and meditation. Ornish recalls that in Tokyo he was asked by a Japanese physician whether he had to brainwash his patients in order to make them change their lifestyles. Noting that heart disease is escalating in Japan because of an espousal of western diet and lifestyle, Ornish ponders: "We have come to a point at which it is considered 'normal' to eat a high-fat diet, to smoke, to feel stressed, to be sedentary, and to take powerful, expensive drugs for the rest of one's life (with known and unknown side-effects) yet we think a person would have to be brainwashed to eat a low-fat diet, meditate, exercise, and stop smoking. It is the Japanese who are being brainwashed by Western advertising and fast-food. The rest of the world is copying our mistakes rather than learning from them. There is a

better way." Once again, Dr. Ornish draws his inspiration for this "better way" from his guru. He writes in the introduction, "Much of what is in this book is a direct outgrowth of twenty-years of study with Swami Satchidananda, the renowned spiritual teacher, for whom I have the deepest respect and appreciation."

So will meditation and yoga classes, and nutrition programs based on vegetarian diets be routinely reimbursed by insurance companies in the near future? We went to Dr. Dean Ornish for the answers. According to Terri Merritt, spokesperson for Dr. Ornish: "At this point Mutual of Omaha is only covering yoga and meditation as a part of the complete rehabilitation package, and they are not being reimbursed as separate items. Dr. Ornish and the rest of the staff hope that if all goes well with the study they might possibly reimburse for yoga and meditation on their own, but that's not the case right now." Blue Shield of California, Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Massachusetts, Connecticut and Indiana as well as U.S. Healthcare in Pennsylvania and New York are some of the insurance companies reviewing the Ornish program. What is heartening to most Hindus is that yoga and meditation, and even vegetarian diets, so often thought of by westerners as far-out or outlandish, are finally getting due credit. They are gaining real legitimacy with the decision taken by Mutual of Omaha in recognizing the Ornish program which has as its cornerstone the principles of low-fat vegetarian food, yogic exercises and meditation. Even more significantly, the presidential task-force now formulating a massive overhaul of the US health care system has endorsed the concept. The task-force is headed by Hillary Rodham Clinton, the President's wife. According to the San Francisco Chronicle: "Mrs. Clinton repeatedly stressed the importance of getting patients to see a doctor early, to catch illnesses before they become complicated and expensive to treat. She praised the Heart Disease Prevention Program developed by Sausalito cardiologist Dr. Dean Ornish which uses a combination of diet and meditation and has reversed the effects of heart disease in some patients. Noting that one major health insurer, Mutual of Omaha, has agreed to cover the cost of Ornish's program, Mrs. Clinton said, 'It is the right thing to do. It is cost-effective. We know that nutrition can play a major role and I hope that more health plans will follow the lead that Dr. Ornish's plan has provided.' Mrs. Clinton indicated that under the President's plan, nutrition programs such as Ornish's might be offered as alternatives or supplements to the basic benefits." Dr. Ornish has been working with Mrs. Clinton's task force on national health care reform, and his research is considered a model for improving quality and reducing costs. n

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