

[Rediscovering Ayurveda](#)

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MEDICINE

Rediscovering Ayurveda

Where do you turn when you discover the expensive drugs and surgery of Western allopathic medicine fail to restore you to permanent good health? Find out why India's holistic healing system is gaining global respect.

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K. Nair had a gut feeling, and it wasn't caused by his painful peptic ulcer. Drugs had failed to relieve his symptoms, and his doctors had scheduled him for surgery. Perhaps subconsciously recalling better medicine in earlier lives, he walked away from his posh Delhi hospital and into the Ayurveda Medical College at Tripunithura in Kerala, India's southernmost state. After three months of treatment in the clinic, Nair reported, "The surgery was avoided. I was not only cured, but also became healthy and able to eat food comfortably."

Success stories like Nair's coupled with modernized facilities have contributed to a massive resurgence in Ayurveda and other traditional medical systems of India. Nair's case helps explain why. Only recently has Western medicine discovered that peptic ulcers are caused by a bacteria, best treated with antibiotics, not surgery or other drugs (which had only a 50%

success rate). Even without knowing the precise cause of Nair's ulcer, the Ayurvedic physician effected a permanent cure by his holistic approach to restore the body's natural defenses--and with none of the unpleasant, debilitating or even fatal side effects of allopathic treatment.

One measure of Ayurveda's newfound popularity is the astonishing increase in annual sales of the Indian herbal medicine industry. According to Dr. K. Anil Kumar, Managing Director of Kerala Ayurvedic Pharmacy Ltd. (KAPL), one of the largest pharmaceutical companies in the country, gross industry income rose from ^{us}\$2.5 million in 1991 to \$550 million during 1997. According to Kumar, total estimated turnover of the industry should cross \$1 billion by the year 2001. Herbal products represent a ripe export opportunity--contrast India's yearly herbal exports today of just \$63 million with China's of \$428 million.

The AIDS epidemic has provoked a new interest and respect for all ancient medical systems, including Ayurveda. An AIDS-like syndrome of immune deficiency is described in the ancient texts. There it is attributed to depletion of ojas (vital fluid) caused especially by excessive sexual activity. A few Ayurvedic doctors even claim they can cure AIDS. The World Health Organization, which has officially recognized Ayurveda as an alternative system of medicine, allows that "In

case of HIV infection, immuno-modulators [such as the Ayurvedic drugs] could prove therapeutically beneficial by restoring the damaged immune system, decreasing the chances of contracting infections, reducing virus load or preventing other manifestations of the disease."

India's National Institute of Immunology tested the seven plants most widely used for ages in Ayurveda. All these plants, according to Dr. K. Ravindran, a Senior Physician of the Coimbatore Arya Vaidyasala, are well known for their anti-stress, immune-boosting properties and are free of side effects. Even if they do not kill the HIV virus, the drugs can at least enhance the body's inherent defenses.

Lack of facilities impedes clinical evaluation of Ayurvedic drugs, not only for AIDS, but for all diseases. As a result, "There is no adequate independent scientific evidence to support the use of these drugs," said Dr. Rohtagi, a Kanpur-based practitioner and researcher. "Centers where these drugs could be clinically evaluated in India show

no enthusiasm in conducting trials." Rohtagi sends drugs to Nigeria for tests.

India's practitioners of Western medicine remain averse to Ayurveda, even while Western scientists and the general public East and West show increasing interest. Dr. S. S. Handa of the Department of Pharmaceuticals, Punjab University in Chandigarh, attributes India's situation to Maucalyism, the policy under which the education system in British times sought to teach Indians to despise everything Indian and extol everything Western. Under the influence of the colonial rulers, Handa said, "We forgot to learn our own heritage and looked upon our systems of medicine with mistrust and disdain. Even so, there has been some improvements in reviving and strengthening this system--but they are so far not up to the mark."

People are voting with their feet in the battle of medical systems. In 1998, Americans for the first time made more visits to practitioners of alternative medicine (naturopaths, homeopaths, chiropractors, herbalists, acupuncturists, reiki

practitioners, etc.) than to AMA-approved doctors. The reason is the same as the surge in popularity of alternative treatment in India--the growing realization that allopathic drugs and surgery not only do not cure disease all that well, but sometimes seriously interfere with continued good health.

Dr. P. V. Rai, Chief Physician, of the Ayurveda Clinic in Walzenhausen, Switzerland, sees daily the limitations of the allopathic approach. He states, "A large number of diseases remain without proper treatment, particularly the metabolic and systemic diseases where the cause of illness is not properly understood. In many such chronic diseases, only the symptoms can be controlled with chemical drugs, but the underlying cause remains untouched. In the case of long-term drug treatment, the patient may be influenced negatively more through the side effects of the drugs taken than through the basic illness."

Dr. Rai believes that diseases and their symptoms as described in the Ayurvedic texts can be easily

translated into the modern concept of diagnoses of illnesses. An alternative treatment with Ayurvedic methods, he said, could thus be introduced in such cases where modern medicine has failed to bring the desired results. Sometimes Ayurvedic drugs can be used along with allopathic remedies, as adverse drug interaction is unknown. Digestive disorders, diabetes and liver disease all respond well to Ayurvedic methods. Besides, as a further alternative, comprehensive Ayurvedic healing methods can be employed in all persons, whether treated previously or otherwise, Rai said. Right now many of the Western patients seen in India are already in advanced stages of disease; had they sought out Ayurveda sooner, better results would occur.

By the numbers: Kerala, the front-runner in traditional systems, has around 110 Ayurvedic hospitals and 550 dispensaries catering to an estimated 30,000 in-patients and nearly five million out-patients. Nationally there are 300,000 Ayurvedic doctors and 12,000 dispensaries. One hundred training colleges turn out a total of 4,000 new doctors yearly. A four-year course typically costs \$5,000 to \$10,000. Unfortunately, according

to Dr. Rajagopalan, a medical adviser to the Indian Government, some of the new students are incompetents who wanted to study Western medicine but failed the exams. These students, he said, have little talent for Ayurveda and are often unable to master the Sanskrit essential to read the texts.

There are additional obstacles to the practice of Ayurveda on a national scale. Just as in other countries and with other systems of medicine, standardization in the manufacture of drugs is a chronic problem. "Ayurvedic physicians once were well qualified to prepare medicines themselves for the use of their patients," says Dr. Handa. Now they rely on drugs manufactured by the pharmaceutical industry, but there is insufficient uniformity in the products. Total sales of Ayurvedic drugs alone is estimated to exceed \$240,000,000.

Following the mushrooming of drug manufacturing units in the country, coupled with deforestation in several states, the availability of medicinal plants and herbs has dropped significantly in recent

years, says Dr. P. K. Varier of Kottakkal Arya Vaidyasala, one of the reputed Indian institutions. Also, there are simply not enough qualified people to identify the thousand different medicinal plants in the wild. This scarcity of medicinal plants has led to the use of sub-standard ingredients, substitutes, adulterants or sometimes even the omitting of certain raw materials from the formulate, causing the end products to become less effective, spurious or adulterated. A quality control system is required, he said. Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee announced recently that a minister would be appointed to look after the traditional medical systems and to establish standards. But the government funds allocated are "peanuts" compared to the allocations given to modern medicine, said Dr. Kumar.

Rx: Why should Hindu leaders and educators be concerned with this medical renaissance? First, the 5,000-year-old system of Indian medicine is being vindicated and rescued from its undeserved rejection by many educated people in modern Indian society. Not only did the ancients know and understand disease, we now find out, they did so on a level that can still surpass much of modern

knowledge. Second, the Macaulay doctrine under the British designed to make Hindus in India despise their heritage remains with us; Ayurveda is just one example. Other ancient sciences--yoga, astrology, ancient architecture and worship, even Vedic economics and mathematics--have similarly been dismissed as so much superstition, outdated knowledge or insufficiently "secular." Third, Western medicine is the result of believing the mind and body to be nothing more than an elaborate machine, a soulless automaton existing briefly in a Godless universe. The very basis of Ayurveda is the Hindu knowledge of the body as the vehicle of the soul, of the functioning of karma, of the inner forces of the chakras, of the power of the Gods, and of the true nature of the mind as it contributes to curing illness. By restoring Ayurveda--which is the Hindu medicine--and kindred ancient arts to their rightful place in our life, we not only gain a way to health, we gain a more religious--and more correct--understanding of who we are and how to live on this planet.

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TREATMENT

Whole Body Overhaul

'Panchakarma' cure can fix what ails you

By Vrindavanam S. Gopalakrishnan
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Kerala enjoys a special reputation for its Ayurvedic tradition. "Their practice is less adulterated than in North India," said Dr. Scott Gerson, who runs an Ayurvedic clinic in New York City and teaches Ayurveda in India. "They practice in a delightfully simple way, with more heart than elsewhere." That's why Indians and foreigners alike have flocked to the famous clinics, and to hotels which have arranged for local practitioners to treat their guests.

The basic treatment is called panchakarma, "five actions," whose intent is to purify the body. Jeff Lindner, an appointed director of KAPL based in Kauai, Hawaii, (where Hinduism Today is produced), quotes the old Kerala saying, "If you don't clean the cloth, it won't catch the dye."

Bodily purification and detoxification are largely ignored in Western medicine, even though it is known that many diseases are the result of toxins entering the body from food or the outside environment. Panchakarma's five treatments are: oil enema; concentrated herbal enema; purgation with medicines; induced vomiting with medicines; and nasal medication. All are done in the course of several days under the supervision of a trained physician who use both traditional methods of diagnosis and modern blood and urine analysis.

Panchakarma is the prerequisite for the rejuvenation therapy, rasayana, to restore the body to good health, according to Dr. Anil Kumar of KAPL. There is synchronized massage with medicated ayurvedic oils to cure rheumatism and improve eyesight and complexion. Herbal steam baths improve peripheral circulation and reduce high blood pressure, stiffness, pain and swelling. For sirodara, which treats neurological disorders, the patient lies on a specially designed table with his head and forehead washed in a continuous stream of oil. A Kerala speciality is the njavarakizhi during which cloth pouches containing hot medicines are applied to the body

to treat nervous disorders, rheumatism, arthritis and emaciation of limbs. Head and neck problems are treated by sirovasthi in which the patient's head is soaked in medicated oil.

Europeans and Japanese are flocking to Kerala for these therapies. The best accommodations and treatments at international standards can run ^{us} \$60/day, while local accommodations and the same intensive treatment run a frugal \$5/day. Similar programs in the US cost \$200-\$800/day and even more--the difference often being enough to cover airfare to India and still save money. Two Italian ladies I met at Keraleeya Ayurveda Samajam in Shomur call their treatment, "quite amazing." One suffered from breast cancer.

But there are difficulties. Unlike the Mediterranean or Japanese spas, in India, points out Lindner, "the lack of infrastructure leaves a pretty large gap with what the visitor is used to at home." Even if one knows which clinic to go to,

one still has to negotiate the airport, the lorrie-filled roads, the local accommodations, and--unfortunately for one seeking health--must avoid getting sick along the way from the water or food.

KAPL has plans to start quality treatment centers across India as Bharatians and foreigners alike wake up to the wonders of India's ancient medical wisdom.