

Well shod on the road to health

By Ruth Ostrow

LAST week, I attended a complementary medicine conference in Noosa, Queensland, with leading doctors, nurses and medicos, all interested in alternative ways of keeping the body healthy.

Among the luminaries were the Gawlers, doctors Ruth and Ian, who run the respected Gawler Foundation; leukemia survivor and health educator Petrea King; US-based Sherrill Sellman, author of bestselling *Mothers: Prevent Your Daughters From Getting Breast Cancer*; then Australian Medical Association president Kerryn Phelps; and Marc Cohen, medical researcher, university lecturer and president of the Australasian Integrative Medicine Association, which runs the annual conference.

AIMA promotes the integration of holistic and complementary medicine with mainstream medical practice, and some of the wonderful topics being discussed included treatments for arthritis, menopause, ageing, a scientific look at Chinese medicine and at meditation, as healing tools.

For me the highlight was sitting in on a panel discussion where doctors, surgeons, psychiatrists, nurses and natural healers from around the country and abroad talked about their own ailments, stresses and diseases, and what they do to make themselves well.

It really was "physician, heal thyself". As one doctor said: "My patients watch how I live. I help a lot of people when I help myself."

While participants asked that no one be individually identified, chairwoman King did agree that I could share some personal tips for self-healing from the best and brightest, without naming names.

King (who doesn't mind being quoted) cured herself of leukemia from which she was not expected to recover. She believes that an important tool for good health is sitting and allowing times of rest, introversion and "composting" -- letting worms come in to feed on our debris so new things can grow. Too much time is geared towards meeting goals and moving forward. She honours time out, the winter of our soul, for its curative value.

Ian Gawler had, in an earlier lecture, already talked about slowing down as one of the positive features of disease. Gawler is one of the country's best-known long-term cancer survivors. In 1975 he had his right leg amputated due to bone cancer, which recurred later that year. In a photo taken at the time, the tumours can be seen all over his chest. Today, as a result of meditation, healthy lifestyle and other self-help techniques, he is regarded as a living miracle.

He maintains that for himself, and many he has helped through his Gawler Foundation, having a disease often lets a person stop, challenge why they are here and find a reason for living that is far richer and more meaningful than they dreamed possible. Many cancer sufferers describe themselves as "happy for the first time", giving themselves permission to do the things they wanted to do, connecting deeply with those around them -- which is profoundly healing in itself.

As one GP offered, many people are addicted to their own adrenalin and this depletes the nervous system. Illness can, on many levels, offer the opportunity for self-reflection, self-nurturing and listening to that inner voice we have neglected all our lives.

One of the interesting points made was that how we eat is as important as what we eat. King promotes whole, healthy foods but says that, as a lover of all food, whatever she does eat she eats with gusto, appreciation and joy. The digestive process is as important as what we put in our mouths.

One doctor talked about prioritising relationships. She gravitates to people who know how to "fluff me up" and "nurture me". Many of us get involved in toxic relationships that drain and deplete us or provoke anger. Better to spend more time with people we enjoy and with whom we can share a laugh. Which isn't being superficial or immature. Evidence confirms that laughter bolsters immunity and helps us to stay healthy. Anger, guilt and stress have the opposite effect on our bodies.

Most of those present practised some gentle exercise -- beach walking, yoga, tai chi. Meditation was highly embraced as a panacea to stress and a means of helping secrete positive hormones, chemicals and oxygen throughout the body.

"Following our passions" was put forward as a big health bolster. One doctor explained to me that if a beautiful child came up and asked sweetly for something, we wouldn't just say shut up, get away. We'd be kind, we'd think of a way to help that child, even against the odds. But we don't award ourselves this same kindness and hence we often feel deprived, angry, and left in a state of grief that robs us of the energy and vitality we need to stay healthy. It was unanimously agreed that finding a way to banish negative thoughts was crucial to good health, whether by meditation, psychotherapy or hypnosis.

But my favourite suggestion came from a female healthcare worker. "I go out and spend lots of money on red velvet boots and nice things. We can't forget the roles joy, sex and fun have in promoting health." Amen to that!

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