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My dad, the wellness expert

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A modest attempt to encourage a bit of sympathy for those who place their faith in alternative medicine

Here is an incomplete list of things you should know about my dad.

He did not have his kids vaccinated; he once allowed his infant son's fever to progress past 102 degrees fahrenheit before he even began to consider my mother's suggestion that maybe we should do something about it; he would visit a chiropractor, probably with a frequency even people who visit the chiropractor would describe as "a lot"; he used to take handfuls of probably useless vitamins (every day), drank oversized bottles of water (constantly), spent too much money on wellness products.

But the one thing I need you to know about my dad, rest his soul, is that he loved his kids. In fact, if you could measure how stupid some of these things sound to you as a medical professional, that would be exactly how much he loved them.

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Whenever Ricky Gervais is on the Late Show, he always ends up talking about God. There's one interview, from about a year ago, where Stephen Colbert asks him why he places so much faith in the scientific method. Doesn't the scientific method, like religion, also require a kind of belief, Colbert asks. Gervais, who has heard this line of argument before, does not agree. He says that if you were to wipe our memories clean and then gather all the religious texts in the world and burn them, those stories would be lost forever. We might eventually rewrite some version of the ones containing the more essential human truths, but they probably wouldn't look the same. By contrast, if you did the same thing with scientific texts, eventually we would rewrite all of them.

I bring this up so you understand that I understand science is fundamentally different—and in the relevant context here, better—than not-science. I'm no apologist for people who draw comparisons between science and religion or, for that matter, between alternative medicine and medicine. What I am interested in is how people come to equate the two. Why place such faith in non-scientific modes of healing when scientific ones require no faith at all? What leads people like my dad down a road that might eventually discourage vaccine use?

The answer, I think, is that people like him need more.

Consider your patients who try to convince you of the value of alternative medicine. Some of them are probably idiots. But, I also think the idiots are the minority. Ironically, the patients who trust alternative therapies tend to be the ones who care most about their health. They don't just want to be free of sickness, they want their bodies to thrive. They want every aspect of their being—their chakras or whatever quasi-religious wellness framework they subscribe to—to be in a state of perfect homeostasis, or as close to it as possible. These are the people for whom your rote "don't smoke, eat well and exercise" just don't cut it.

Modern medicine does amazing things. The conventional wisdom doctors offer about preventing sicknesses is important and useful and, to be honest, enough for most people. But medical science also doesn't have much to say about elevated states of wellness, or about curbing more minuscule risk of disease that occupy outsized spaces in our paranoid imaginations. That's because: a) medical scientists, like doctors, have their hands full with more prevalent disease, the slow decay of our bodies, death, etc.; and b) degrees of wellness don't really exist the same way degrees of sickness do. Not only is there no reason to try and measure "higher states of wellness" there doesn't seem to be anything to measure.

I'm not saying this is a limitation of the scientific method. I'm saying that the mind abhors this vacuum. So, some of us try to fill it. Ancient medicines are useful because they carry cultural or religious meaning. They're inscrutable. They either don't work (likely) or they work in some way we can't really measure or understand (significantly less likely). This is truer today than it was when these remedies were used to cure an infected

arrow wound or something. Now, we—or the people who believe in them, rather—attribute a kind of mysticism to them.

This does serve a purpose. Even within a scientific framework, spirituality is accepted as an important aspect of health. Alternative medicine only becomes perverse when it is used to discredit more credible modes of healing.

People who do this knowingly deserve no quarter, and I am in full support of those of you who do the important work of being mean to these hucksters online. But it's also important to understand that what draws patients to them—to pay exorbitant prices for jade eggs and the like—is a genuine desire for the best for themselves and the people they love; maybe even something better than what medical science can offer them.

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Many doctors used to have a difficult time with my dad. He asked dozens of questions about insignificant things, and he was rarely satisfied with the answers. I remember being in a walk-in clinic as a kid and listening to a doctor tell my dad he was "incredibly frustrating." Just matter of factly, right to his face, like he was reading it off the side of a pill bottle.

Thing was, I was always taught that it was okay to be "incredibly frustrating." As a kid, I would pepper my dad with questions about mundane or unexplainable things for 20-, 30-, or 40-minute car rides. He was always careful never to discourage my curiosity. He always told me the truth about what he believed. He was always thoughtful. Like most fathers are in the eyes of their impressionable youngsters, he was beyond reproach.

Which is why I was thrown off when another adult scolded my dad for asking questions. All these years later, I get it. Doctors have other, sicker patients with more pressing questions. "I know you just want the best for your kid," the doctor might as well have said, "but, honestly, we've been discussing that prescription you read something weird about for the last 10 minutes and I can't do it for another 10."

Still, my dad wasn't anti-science, even if on certain topics he was wrong about what the science was. Which is why I find it, in the words of that affectless walk-in doctor, frustrating to see people like my dad referred to as sorts of lost souls, as if he were treating his kids with thyme and mandrake root. My dad understood that there were professionals who knew more than him, but he also had a few not-unreasonable guiding beliefs: That, when given the option, natural unprocessed things were better for us; that the body is a magnificent self-regulating machine, capable of healing itself of most minor ailments; that there was more to wellness than the doctors would—or could—tell him.

So, he tried to find those answers elsewhere. Along the way he made mistakes. Someone probably should have tried harder to correct those mistakes, but perhaps we should also try to understand why people like him make them.

Tristan Bronca is the associate editor of the Medical Post.

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