

Mother, daughter doctors treat mind, body, spirit

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SCOTTSDALE - With luxury spas around the Valley touting Ayurvedic beauty treatments, it's easy to forget Ayurveda has a 5,000 year history in South Asia as a system for comprehensive medical care.

In modern India, Ayurveda is regulated like other medical practices. The Central Council of Indian Medicine governs it and signs off on research in the field.

Some Western authorities, including the National Institutes of Health, say high quality research on the subject is lacking and warn that some treatments may involve excessive amounts of heavy metals.

But several U.S. drug companies have found it effective enough to get into legal trouble with Indian medical authorities for trying to patent ancient Ayurvedic treatments, including one based on the cooking spice turmeric.

The discipline is followed by well-known author and physician Dr. Deepak Chopra.

Ayurveda practiced by doctors

Another medical doctor who sees a place for Ayurveda in modern healthcare is Dr. Purnima Mehta.

Mehta and her daughter, Dr. Meghana Thanki, a naturopath, operate Ayurzona, a Scottsdale medical clinic.

Their "integrative wellness center" combines Ayurveda with clinical care based on Western disciplines.

Mehta is also a board-certified psychiatrist.

Ayurveda uses a mind-body-spirit approach that starts with an examination.

As a primary care doctor, Thanki takes blood pressure readings and listens to the heart. She asks patients about diet, exercise, sleep, bowel movements and specific symptoms.

"As an M.D., I assess symptoms, but in Ayurveda we look at the person as a whole,"

said Mehta, who grew up in Uganda, where her Indian parents, both medical doctors, treated President Idi Amin and his wives; eventually the family fled to England.

Mehta, 52, earned her medical degree in Mumbai, India and trained in psychiatry in England and the U.S.

Thanki, 27, earned her medical degree at the Southwest College of Naturopathic Medicine in Tempe.

Air, fire and water assessed

An Ayurvedic doctor assesses the balance of the body's three doshas, or elements, vata (air), pitta (fire) and kapha (water), and then rebalances them. Doshas can be influenced by stress, bacterial infections, diet and other factors.

The doctor takes an Ayurvedic pulse by placing three fingers on the radial artery at the wrist and sensing which of the body humors "rises," said Mehta. Then the tongue is examined for clues on toxins, absorption of nutrients, and problems with the body's organs. Symptoms are associated with the doshas. Someone with constipation may be vata toxic, while obesity may be a kapha disturbance.

"We all have a cellular intelligence, like nature," said Mehta, getting at the base of Ayurvedic theory. Most people are aware of cellular intelligence as food cravings that reflect biological needs, but it gets more complicated.

"As we have earthquakes, fire and floods that cause devastation in nature, we have excesses in our bodies that can cause devastation," Mehta said.

Someone who is trained can identify what's out of kilter and bring the vata, pitta and kapha back into balance, in Ayurveda, which holds that whatever is in the environment or in our food is reflected in our body and spirit.

Because of her background in psychiatry, Mehta was drawn to the spiritual healing part of the discipline.

"In Michigan I treated children and adults, but I felt that emotional suffering needed more answers than talking in a room," she said.

Ayurveda employs meditation and yoga to alter the mental and spiritual state, again to rebalance the fire, water and air as in the body, Mehta and Thanki said.

Office looks can be deceiving

For that reason, the Ayurzona offices in downtown Scottsdale don't look much like a medical suite. Entering through a garden with statues of meditating Buddhas, a patient begins treatment in the "Intentions" room, where ancient methods are used to

focus on the goal of the treatment. Different therapies are given in various rooms: the "coming home" room for spiritual therapy, the Shirodhara room where oils and herbs are used, a yoga room and a meditation room.

"Recycling room" is what they call the restroom. Asked how they came to practice together, the mother and daughter say the idea just evolved.

"Here I am an M.D., and my daughter is an N.D., and we studied Ayurveda together (in Michigan). What better thing than to bring all these resources to bear on health?" Mehta said.



Dr. Meghana Thanki (left) is a naturopathic physician and practices with her mother, Dr. Purnima Mehta.