

Chronic Diseases: Rethinking our rusty magic bullets

by Dr. Delia Chiaramonte, [Baltimore Health Examiner](#)

After the days of leeches had passed, doctors became virtual miracle workers. No need to die from scarlet fever anymore – we have penicillin! Our vaccines prevent Polio. Our sterile surgical technique can make a broken man whole again. Those were the good old days. Medicine was complex yet simple: attack disease and restore the body to health. We wielded our tools mightily: scans, medications, radiation and surgery. We knew that there was more to learn, but at least the map was clear.

Things have changed.

We have all survived, or been vaccinated against, the childhood infections that attacked previous generations. We have survived childbirth and prevented our genetically programmed heart attacks. Yet we suffer decades of stress, which takes a poorly defined, but clearly significant, toll on our bodies. We have different problems now and we need different solutions – our magic bullets have rusted.

Ask people who suffer from vexing illnesses such as chronic pain, multiple sclerosis, post traumatic stress disorder, and chronic fatigue syndrome about our ‘miracle cures.’ I doubt they will sing our praises. Our ‘shoot to kill’ methods simply don’t work for most chronic diseases. Dr. David Reilly, a well-respected integrative medicine physician (who recently gave an inspiring talk at the University of Maryland), asks doctors to think of ourselves as gardeners. As ‘gardeners’ we support the body’s natural healing abilities, using gentle and safe therapies whenever possible and saving the aggressive methods for when they are clearly needed. We can help our patients identify their innate healing strengths and encourage their capacity for health and wellness.

Caring for those with chronic illnesses takes an entirely different mind-set. Doctors and patients must both accept that there is no magic medicine around the corner that will eliminate all the suffering. The road to wellness will likely be circuitous and require commitment. There will be lifestyle issues to consider such as sleep and exercise and nutrition. The doctor and the patient must enter into a partnership of mutual respect, and they must take the time to trust each other. They must listen – truly listen – to each other and include the patient’s beliefs and values in their treatment decisions.

We need a new game plan for the future of medicine. One that includes patients with chronic illnesses or symptoms for which there is no magic pill. I believe that we will get there, and when we do both patients and physicians will be happier. Yes, we will get there, but first we need to stop trying to smash the chronic disease peg into the magic bullet hole.

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