

DOCTOR FILES

When the remedy begins with an open mind

By MYLES SPAR
Special to *The Times*

Yet again I found myself explaining to a patient that I wasn't sure what was causing her symptoms, but that after the X-rays and blood tests, I had found nothing wrong with her. I reassured her that her abdominal pain was nothing serious and offered her medications to try to alleviate the symptoms. She had already tried them all with mixed success.

Such situations made me feel like a failure as a physician. Even though I had conscientiously ruled out anything life-threatening or more clearly definable, I was again left with the answer that seems to be the case all too often in primary care: "I don't know, but it's nothing serious."

So I gave "Ms. Henderson" a prescription that would stop cramps and another that would block acid. I didn't hear from her right away, so I figured that had done the trick.

At her next appointment, three months later, she was worried about feelings of dizziness. I asked about the abdominal pain, and she seemed to strain to recall it. Then she remembered that the medicines I had given her had made her sick, so she had tried acupuncture. The acupuncturist said something about deficient spleen *qi*, or something, she said, and whatever it was went away after a few treatments. But, she said, about this dizziness...

So again we went through the dance of tests trying to find something I could diagnose with a big "aha!" and be able to prescribe the definitive cure. Again I found nothing wrong and prescribed a medicine to treat the vertigo without knowing the cause. Again I didn't hear from her for a few months, so I figured I



Photo illustration by SPENCER WEINER *Los Angeles Times*

had helped her.

Wrong again. She was back three or four months later with a feeling of general fatigue. When I asked what had happened to her dizziness, she told me that the medicine I had prescribed had made her tired. So instead she tried an herbal remedy recommended by a friend — something with ginger, she said. The dizziness had vanished in three days. But, she said, about this fatigue...

I almost wondered why she kept coming back to me.

I'm sure I've had at least one time in my past 10 years of practice when I had a definitive "aha!" when I knew the exact diagnosis as well as a proven cure. But that has been rare. I've had some half "ahas!" when I could make a definitive diagnosis, but usually these were coupled with "well - we don't have a cure, but we can try this or that to treat the symptoms..."

Other times, I've given treatments that got rid of the symptoms beautifully without ever knowing the cause.

A firm diagnosis, coupled with a proven cure, has been rare.

I could easily have felt disillusioned by my profession, considering

that Western medicine seemed to have little to offer Ms. Henderson — and the many patients like her. But she didn't necessarily expect me to have all the answers.

What she needed from me was a compassionate ear, some reassurance that her condition wasn't life-threatening and, she hoped, something to alleviate her symptoms. Once I was able to reassure her that there was nothing seriously wrong, she felt free to explore whatever approaches might work to ease her discomfort.

The embrace of complementary medicine has been driven by patients much more than physicians. Our patients feel more comfortable than we do with the idea that we may not understand every reason for distress in the human body and psyche. Once the Western physician reassures, more and more of our patients are showing us that there are other approaches to healing, if not curing.

And once I let go of the notion that I was a failure if I couldn't definitively diagnose every patient that walked into my office, I became open to other approaches to healing — approaches that have been used and proven valid for centuries.

I have learned about the use of herbs and botanicals to alleviate symptoms for which I would have previously used more toxic pharmaceuticals. I have used time traditionally spent reading only Western medical journals to also study nutrition and acupuncture. Most important, I have joined a team of complementary medicine professionals with expertise in traditional Chinese medicine, nutrition, herbs, chiropractic, massage therapy and mind-body healing. Together, we discuss what each can offer for the health and well-being of a particular patient.

Thanks to patients like Ms. Henderson, I have learned that in addition to using Western medicines to treat symptoms, I can use many other methods to heal and to prevent disease.

I still don't have to have all the answers, but I owe it to my patients to follow their lead.

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Don't let stress make you worried sick — or worse

It's difficult to avoid anxiety, but exercise and other activities can keep it from running down your health.

By MYLES SPAR
Special to *The Times*

Stress can kill. That may seem overly dramatic, but multiple studies support what my colleagues and I see so often: Emotional stress is taking its toll on the physical health of our patients.

One woman who visited our office recently had two children in the armed forces in Iraq. They were supposed to come home weeks earlier, but had been ordered to remain for a while longer. She had had a case of the flu for over two weeks.

We ran tests to be sure there was nothing more seriously wrong, but it appeared that her immune system was just not doing the job it needed to do.

I told her that chronic stress causes a prolonged state of inflammation that depletes the immune system's resources. I recommended that she try yoga or relaxation techniques such as deep-breathing exercises, adding that meditation has been shown to strengthen the im-

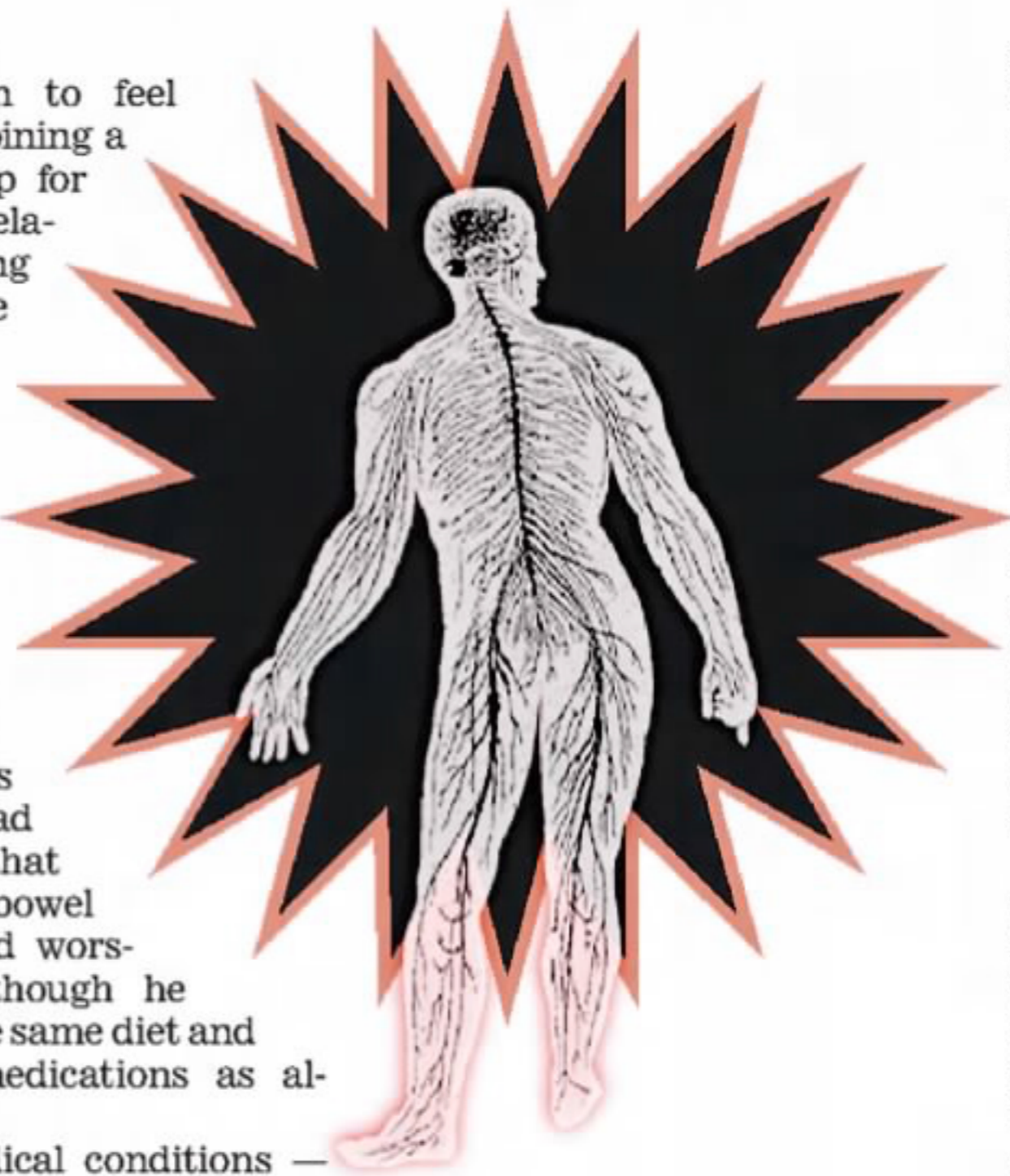
mune system.

She began to feel better after joining a support group for people with relatives serving abroad in the military.

Another patient had recently been laid off. He was worried about paying the bills and taking care of his family. He had also noticed that his irritable bowel syndrome had worsened, even though he was eating the same diet and taking his medications as always.

Many medical conditions — such as irritable bowel syndrome or eczema — get worse during times of stress. This didn't mean that the symptoms were "all in his head." It meant that the biological effects of stress cause certain conditions to worsen. I recommended increasing his intake of fruits and vegetables, foods that have antioxidants that can help protect the body from the effects of stress.

Another woman had just been diagnosed with leukemia.



WES BAUSMITH *Los Angeles Times*

Her husband had died a year earlier. She wondered what the relationship could be between his death and her cancer diagnosis.

Certainly it cannot be proved that the stress of dealing with her husband's death contributed to her cancer, but we do know that specific cells in the immune system help fight cancer cells

and that the activity of those cells is decreased in times of stress.

I tried to emphasize the importance of dealing with her loss in a way that minimized her continued pain, so that her body could start to heal — both emotionally and physically. She took up yoga and meditation to help her body relax.

Stress has been implicated as a factor in heart disease, cancer, asthma, chronic fatigue and a propensity for infections. It is so pervasive a part of our lives in 21st century Los Angeles, that I try to discuss it with all of my patients.

I depend on them to share with me what is going on in their lives — even things they may not think are related to their physical complaints. It is important for me, as their primary care doctor, to understand what they are dealing with in their lives — only then can I make an accurate diagnosis and realistic recommendations.

When patients express doubt about the ability of emotional feelings to affect them physically, I ask them to consider what happens when they get nervous. Maybe the heart races, maybe the palms start to sweat — either way, they are experiencing physical symptoms in response to stressful thoughts. When such stressful thoughts are chronic,

there are ongoing physical effects that wear down the body.

Obviously it is important to minimize our feelings of stress and anxiety by dealing with the root causes. But we also have to work to reduce the physical impact of stress when it cannot be controlled. After all, a certain amount of stress is unavoidable.

Whether it is war in Iraq, a traffic jam, or financial difficulties and a weak economy, there are times when we cannot control the causes of stress in our lives. What we can do is prevent stress from making us sick, by checking in with a health-care provider and learning about ways to protect the body from the effects of stress.

Exercising regularly, maintaining a healthy diet, getting enough sleep, talking out problems, practicing yoga or meditation — even simply taking five to 10 deep breaths in a row — all have been shown to decrease the stress response in the body. Even though no one can avoid stress entirely, we are not powerless to prevent that stress from making us sick.

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