

# Looking For Health In All The Wrong Places

## *Understanding the most elementary and most elusive principle of health!*

By Douglas Lisle, Ph.D., and Alan Goldhamer, D.C.

In the late 1800s, a young Scottish physician was experiencing difficulty in establishing his medical practice. With extra time on his hands, the young man turned his remarkable mind to the telling of mysteries and their solutions. In contrast to his struggling practice, his writing would be an immediate and astounding success. The young doctor's name was Arthur Conan Doyle and his literary creation, Sherlock Holmes, would become synonymous with deductive genius for generations to come.

Though a fine storyteller with a flair for both humor and drama, perhaps Doyle's greatest talent was his penetrating vision into the nature of human problem solving. In particular, Doyle had an uncanny sense for spotting human problem-solving blind spots and mental biases to which he made sure that the great Holmes was immune. Indeed, a crucial component of Holmes's timeless appeal is his ability to make sense out of what less gifted observers might view as insufficient or contradictory evidence.

Holmes's special talent is his ability to appreciate the importance of clues that others fail to notice, although their importance is obvious once seen from the proper perspective. Often, this perspective requires Holmes to look at the evidence from a viewpoint that is precisely opposite from one that seems naturally right.

Holmes solved mysteries, because of his brilliant awareness that the absence of something is often just as important as its presence. Though clearly true, this point is often difficult for most of us to grasp.

This difficulty is the result of a natural human problem-solving blind spot, an innate limitation of our psychology. It is precisely this type of human limitation that Holmes was so adept at noticing. And it is this type of limitation that results in the majority of our society remaining blind to the key facts regarding their health, although the facts are overwhelming once seen from the proper perspective.

### **Health mysteries**

Millions of people in our country are suffering and dying from a handful of devastating conditions, including heart attack, stroke, congestive heart failure, diabetes, and cancer. These conditions alone account for more than 75 percent of our nation's premature deaths and the majority of our collective chronic disability. Yet, the culprits in these tragedies have been difficult for most people to accurately identify.

The evidence, to many, appears to be contradictory and confusing. Like a Sherlock Holmes mystery, people are puzzled about finding the causes of their health problems and what to do about them. They look to experts in books, television, and the Internet, and to their doctors. More than 10 million people search the Internet each week seeking health-related information, making health information-seeking one of our population's primary intellectual pursuits. This is quite appropriate, as our health problems are of epidemic proportions.

Unfortunately, most of the "expert" information dispensed is erroneous and misleading. For example, patients often are led to believe that the real culprits in their health problems are their genes. This misconception can lead them to assume that any solution to their problems will require medical intervention, because their particular body simply doesn't work properly, that it is "defective" by nature. If they have high cholesterol, they are told to ingest cholesterol-lowering drugs. If they have high blood pressure, they are encouraged to ingest blood pressure-lowering medications. And, if they have Type II diabetes (about 95 percent of all diabetes cases), they are told that their health requires that they ingest or inject insulin.

In the alternative health arena, the “expert” suggestions are somewhat different. Herbal remedies, vitamin supplements, and other treatments are the standard fare. Similar to conventional thought, such alternative approaches seem to confirm the same unspoken conclusion: The body of a person with a health problem cannot be expected to achieve and sustain a healthy state without adding something! Either by virtue of genetic flaw or because of dietary deficiency, the notion once again is that something is missing. The recommendation to “take something for it” makes intuitive sense to the majority of people, often encouraging them to continue down a path of self-destruction. Meanwhile, the real culprits are ignored and continue to do their damage, unchecked.

### **The real culprits**

The real culprits in most modern-day health problems are excesses, not deficiencies. It is the subtraction (i.e., reduction or elimination) of these excesses that will solve most health problems, not the addition of medications or supplements. Although it may come as a surprise to most people, the subtraction of excess is nearly always far more effective at causing the restoration of health than is the addition of anything.

In atherosclerosis, for example, excess dietary cholesterol, fat, and protein (mostly in the form of animal products) leads to deposits of fatty substances within the cardiovascular system. These deposits clog up the system and often result in heart attack, stroke, or congestive heart failure, events that are responsible for about 50 percent of the deaths in our country each day. Exquisite research has shown that the subtraction of these dietary excesses is the most effective way to manage the problem. In the ground breaking Lifestyle Health Trial, Dean Ornish and his colleagues at the University of California have conclusively demonstrated that by dramatically reducing the amount of animal products in the diet, and by reducing fat intake from about 40 percent to about 10 percent of calories consumed, the body will soon begin to reverse the atherosclerosis. Neither medication nor nutritional supplement additive has shown equivalent success.

### **Not elementary**

Sherlock Holmes was fond of explaining to his sidekick, Dr. Watson, that the connections he made were “elementary.” Of course, nothing could have been further from the truth. Although obvious once viewed from the proper perspective, the achievement of mental clarity in a Sherlock Holmes mystery is an exciting moment for the reader, as Holmes brilliantly maneuvers those present into seeing the facts in a clear and accurate new light. Not uncommonly, this mental reorganization begins with a startling conceptual leap.

Grasping that the major key to health is mostly about subtraction, and not addition, is itself a major conceptual leap. Although seemingly simple, this connection is perhaps the most profound and most difficult principle in modern health science. Once seen from the proper perspective, it is simple. But achieving this perspective is a remarkably challenging mental task. After many years of experience at patient education, we have come to believe that there is a powerful and fundamental force that is responsible for this difficulty.

There must be a compelling reason why humans continue to be so gullible about believing that adding things, such as vitamin pills, medication, aspirin, and even wine, is useful for the pursuit of health. There must be a reason why such solutions seem much more plausible than the truth. The truth is that we need to subtract meat, fish, fowl, eggs, dairy products, and tobacco. Although we might speculate that the human pleasure-seeking drive might be motivating patient resistance to the truth, we don’t think that this is the core of the problem. And, although massive misinformation campaigns by commercial interests do help to lead the unwary down a false trail, our experience suggests that a more fundamental factor is at work.

We strongly suspect that the human brain is literally biased against grasping the concept that dietary excesses are the roots of most health problems, in spite of the enormous magnitude of the supportive scientific evidence. Conversely, the idea that some sort of deficiency may be

responsible continues to be popular. This is probably because such a concept has tremendous natural intuitive appeal.

### **Brains and biases**

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle unwittingly anticipated one of the great discoveries of modern psychology. As he clearly suspected, human brains are not impartial judges of the facts. Brains come into being with hard-wired biases, with tendencies to see some connections much more readily than others. Brains of humans (and other animals) are much more likely to see connections that they expect to see. The connections they expect to see are often those that were important to notice throughout the development of the species.

In the natural world, human beings rarely, if ever, faced problems resulting from dietary excesses, because the natural landscape was simply not replete with excessive animal proteins and fats in the form of cheese, ice cream, and butter. The natural world contained no processed oils, refined sugar and flours, or excessive sodium. And, since problems of dietary excess were not a factor in our evolutionary history, modern-day humans are not well equipped to discern that health problems might be the result of these excesses.

Dietary deficiencies, on the other hand, were often a very serious problem for our ancestors. Getting enough to eat has always been one of the major problems of human life. People walking the Earth today, then, must all be the descendants of those who maintained heightened vigilance about the problem of getting enough, and not descendants of those who spent much time worrying about getting too much. As such, the neurological circuits that make up the current human mind are much more likely to be naturally concerned with deficiency than with excess! This bias makes it difficult to grasp the concept that dietary excesses are the roots of our modern health problems. Difficulty in grasping this principle persists despite the overwhelming scientific evidence supporting this interpretation of the facts.

### **Pecking the right key**

Neurological biases now are being discovered

throughout the animal kingdom, but until the concept of biased brains was itself recognized, many important facts were ignored. For example, psychologists such as B.F. Skinner, who were attempting to uncover the laws of learning, performed a great many experiments attempting to train pigeons. In attempting to teach pigeons to do new things, these psychologists would routinely reward the birds by lighting a key for them to peck, which when pecked would then result in a food reward. This method was used for decades without question. One day, a psychologist wondered if the pigeons could be trained equally effectively by having a continuously lighted key go dark in order to signal the pigeons to peck. He decided to put this question to the test.

To the surprise of animal psychologists worldwide, his results showed that pigeons couldn't be trained to seek reward by pecking a lighted key that suddenly goes dark! In principle such an event is precisely as informative as having a darkened key suddenly become lighted, but it is a connection that a pigeon simply cannot make. And while we might think that the pigeon is just "stupid," such a judgment would miss the key point: That, similarly, people will not normally grasp the importance of a dog not barking in the night.

### **Subtraction for health**

In the last two decades, a great deal of psychological research has shown that people have many biases, problem-solving "blind spots." People appear to have a natural bias against seeing dietary excess as a problem. But when viewed from an enlightened perspective, the problems resulting from dietary excess can become obvious. Once we grasp what the scientific evidence is telling us, no matter how counterintuitive these findings may seem, we can begin to see the evidence everywhere. Wherever we look, we cannot help but see people struggling with obesity, the ultimate evidence of dietary excess. Once we begin to carefully observe what people in our society actually eat, the connection between dietary excess and health compromise begins to achieve clarity.

If we then follow the evidence and the logic, it begins to become reasonable to assume that the solution is to subtract foods of excess from our daily fare. And as we subtract meat, fish, fowl, eggs, dairy products, oil, salt, sugar, and refined carbohydrates from our diet, what remains are foods that are health-promoting. Fresh fruits and vegetables, tubers, whole grains, legumes, and nuts and seeds fill the void after the necessary subtraction has taken place. In response, the previously overburdened body begins to experience a restoration of health.

### **Doyle would approve**

We have argued that one of the most potent methods for the restoration of health involves doing precisely the opposite of what most people, and most health "experts," would ever suspect. If most health problems are indeed caused by dietary excesses (and research strongly suggests they are), then it makes sense that the subtraction of such excesses is likely to be a very effective treatment strategy. Landmark investigations by Drs. Ornish, McDougall, Esselsteyn, and others have confirmed that this is the case.

The health-promoting results achieved by our patients after the removal of dietary excesses through dietary modification and fasting are often spectacular, by conventional standards. The power of the body's ability to recover its health is remarkable, once the true culprits have been identified and effectively eliminated. And although most modern "experts" of both conventional and alternative persuasions are resistant to considering this perspective, we are confident that the evidence will eventually make the truth appear obvious.

In the meantime, we also are confident that at least one 19th-century Scottish physician would have had no trouble grasping this critical, and highly counterintuitive, principle of health. As Sherlock Holmes would have elegantly revealed, once seen from the proper perspective, the crucial importance of eliminating dietary excesses is, in fact, "Elementary, my dear Watson..."

Please visit this website to read more articles from this author:

<http://www.healthpromoting.com/Articles/articles.htm>

### **WARNING:**

The Information in these articles are not intended to replace medical advice or treatment. Questions about symptoms, specific dietary needs and medications, general or specific, should be discussed with your physician. The information in this article is for informational purposes only, and is not medical advice or a substitute for a physician's consultation and/or examination.

Bring freedom and choice back to medicine by supporting [Americans for Free Choice in Medicine](http://www.afcm.org).  
[Http://www.afcm.org](http://www.afcm.org)