

Enhancing the healing environment: Keynote Address

His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales

Introduction

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An important way of advancing understanding and knowledge is to focus on a definable problem. A different way, complementary to the first, is to make links; links between what, hitherto, might have been thought of as disconnected systems. How would we understand the placebo effect, for example, were we not to make links between psyche and soma? Those toiling in the psychoneuroimmunology vineyard do so because the endocrine and immune systems talk to each other and to the brain.

In his Keynote Address, HRH the Prince of Wales calls for greater links to be made between health and the nature of the residential environment. He discusses the healing environment but the connections he makes are not limited to healing. They are likely to relate to the causes of health and illness as well as response to illness. Underlying these linkages is the fact that not only does physiology have a powerful influence on events in the mind, but the connection goes the other way. Environments that impinge on the mind have powerful effects on other physiological processes (ie beyond the brain) and hence influence health and well-being. This is no longer 'alternative' medicine, if 'alternative' denotes something less than scientific, but is well supported by a wide range of research. In bringing together his interests both in health and the built environment, HRH highlights clear implications: part of creating conditions for better health is the creation of habitats that are not only fit for people to live in but generate positive well-being.

This conference brings together two very great concerns of mine: human health and the built environment. Specifically, I would like to talk about how we heal the mind and body; how we heal the physical world in which we live and how both are connected much more than we previously thought.

I do believe that our modern, over-industrialized world is gradually coming to terms with a historic new understanding of the extent to which all aspects of life are interconnected. This recognition is slowly transforming our approach to medicine, to science, to our environment and to the way we build our world.

At the very core of a change in our philosophy, attitude and behaviour is, I suggest, the notion of healing. Interestingly, the word 'heal', as I'm sure you all know, is the same as the root of the word 'whole'. Just as we now realise we can't treat organs in isolation, but must promote the health of the whole person, so we are beginning to see that we can't treat people in isolation either. It is imperative that we apply the notion of healing not only to ourselves, but also to our built and natural environments which have been so brutalized throughout the last century, and we are beginning, I believe, to see the results of all this.

The unintended consequences of our past refusal to acknowledge this inter-connectedness are tragic, and increasingly well documented. For example, the use of organophosphate pesticides in farming has disrupted entire ecosystems and, despite being banned almost 20 years ago, the pesticides are still detectable in human blood. I have been told that a herbicide used widely to kill weeds in maize is turning frogs into hermaphrodites. It has been reported that similar man-made toxins are disrupting reproduction in fish, polar bears and other animals.

As Sir Tom Blundell, the Chairman of the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution, said in his introduction to the Commission's report on *Chemicals in Products*:

Given our understanding of the way chemicals react with the environment, you could say we are running a gigantic experiment with humans and all other living things as the subject.¹

And it is unfortunately becoming increasingly obvious that we have polluted our atmosphere to such an extent that climate change may cause profound disruptions to life on earth, if we do not find a way of changing our methods of operating as soon as possible.

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The same principle of unintended consequences applies to our built environment. We are beginning to see that when we build badly, it doesn't only affect the health of the natural environment, it affects our own health as well. We are slowly discovering that if we plan our towns and cities with the car at the centre of the design process, instead of putting the pedestrian at the centre and thereby creating attractive and well-organized human-scale neighbourhoods, it is likely to have an adverse effect on, for instance, obesity, heart disease, asthma and respiratory diseases. Neighbourhoods with a strong 'public realm' – such as public gathering areas, buildings connected to the street and a diverse mix of shops and recreational areas – seem to have much higher levels of what the sociologists call 'social capital'. This ability of people to form social networks helps them to meet each other's needs and it also seems to promote a healthy immune response to a variety of physical and mental illnesses.

Well-designed places and buildings that relate to locality and landscape that are, as the dear old Prayer Book puts it 'in love and charity with their neighbours' and that put people before cars enhance a sense of community and rootedness. I'm not just making this up, because in fact Oxford Brookes University did a study into this development in Poundbury which the Duchy of Cornwall have been doing on the edge of Dorchester, and these are the kinds of things they found. They also create what can only be called beauty – and beauty is something the human soul needs and has been starved of throughout too much of the twentieth century. Bob Geldof told me twenty years ago, when they were first putting together the Live Aid project, that he'd been born and brought up in a peripheral housing estate on the edge of Dublin and he remembered so well the sense of overwhelming ugliness that invaded his soul when he was younger. We had very interesting conversations about that and it was very revealing.

Just as in so many ways we are what we eat, we are also what we are surrounded by. As Sir Winston Churchill said,

We shape our buildings, and afterwards our buildings shape us.

So is it any surprise that our cavalier attitude to the health of our physical environment is also creating our own health problems? Modern pollutants found in the chemicals with which we surround ourselves are giving rise to new terminology such as 'sick building syndrome' and 'multiple chemical sensitivity'. As many of you may know, a report by the Royal College of Physicians last year showed an alarming increase in allergies over the last few years.² The UK ranks highest now in the world for asthma, and treatments are costing the NHS £900 million a year.

This huge rise in allergic conditions demonstrates not only the need to treat and cure an individual's symptoms, but also the need to identify the underlying factors that have led to a greater prevalence of allergic illnesses.

My Foundation for Integrated Health believes in a healthcare system that emphasizes health and healing as well as disease and treatment. It is working to bring together conventional and complementary practitioners in order to develop an integration of

healthcare practices and traditions; a healthcare system that takes into consideration environmental, psychosocial and nutritional aspects of health and, importantly, a healthcare system that recognizes the role that different traditions, treatments and methods all have in the healing process.

Both my Foundation for Integrated Health and my Foundation for the Built Environment realize that we have to think much more carefully about healthcare environments. I doubt whether any of you will recall a report I commissioned as long ago as 1995 entitled *The whole question of health*,³ which investigated time-honoured principles of form in architecture and the proposition that they were health-giving. For instance, I understand that something as simple as the view from a hospital ward may reduce the need for pain-killers and the length of stay of patients who have had surgery. The design of wards, the amount of natural light and shadow, and the quality of ventilation all have an apparent bearing on how patients recover. To take another example, as we struggle to control the MRSA bacteria, the issue of single-beds versus wards and their associated costs has become a contentious and important subject.

The NHS, which is the third largest employer in the world, is currently undertaking a massive new building programme. At such a critical moment I do believe it is vital to avoid the serious mistakes of the past and to apply new lessons – in other words we must be sure to place the patient, the human being, with all his or her psychosocial and spiritual needs, at the centre of the design process and not the technology or the imaginative abstraction first and then the people fitted around it. This is the same as I was saying earlier about putting the pedestrian and not the car at the centre of the design process. My Foundation for the Built Environment has been working closely with the NHS, and with NHS Estates, to improve the quality of new hospitals and to ensure that they are well integrated with healthy new communities. We know what can be achieved – the King's Fund's scheme, *Enhancing the Healing Environment*,⁴ for instance, has shown how good design can make a real difference, affecting the quality of life of patients, staff and visitors.

The effect in sickness of beautiful objects is hardly at all appreciated. People say the effect is all in the mind. It is no such thing. The effect is on the body too.

Not my words, but those of Florence Nightingale, based on a lifetime's experience of nursing. She was expressing a personal opinion; but we now have a growing body of evidence of the power of the physical environment to help or hinder the healing process.

Just as we are learning that we cannot treat the human body as a mere machine, that we cannot treat Nature as a purely mechanical process, so too, we are learning that we cannot treat our cities and towns as what Le Corbusier called a 'machine for living' – a collection of mechanical parts. And yet this is what I fear too many in the professions involved with the built environment are still doing, even today. The remarkable urban scholar, Jane Jacobs, described this situation over forty years ago when she said:

*Cities happen to be problems in organized complexity, like the life sciences ... they are 'interrelated into an organic whole'... This is a point of view which has little currency yet among planners themselves, among architectural city designers, or among the businessmen and legislators ...*⁵

So, instead of seeing every building as an opportunity to make an ever more imaginative iconic 'statement' – and to indulge our egotistical ambitions – I believe we must see each piece of the built environment as part of a living language, connected to a living tradition. We must come to regard the characteristics of traditional architecture as not merely unfashionable political statements, to be thrown out with yesterday's rubbish, along with the baby and the bathwater – but, rather, as organically adapting creations over the passage of time, helping us to generate and regenerate places that relate to our essential humanity.

I am sure you all know what I mean, in your heart of hearts – it's just that so many of us are terrified of being thought of as old-fashioned, out of touch and 'not modern'. (Don't worry, I've already volunteered for this particular task!) And yet why can't we be concerned about being human for God's sake? For that way lies true modernity I maintain, lying poised at the point of balance between the past and the future. As TS Eliot put it, 'At the still point of the turning world' ... 'the intersection of the timeless moment'. And again:

*... A people without history
Is not redeemed from time, for history is a pattern
Of timeless moments.*⁶

Just stop and think for a moment why it is that so many people want to live in the lovely old conservation areas of our towns and cities – the bits that weren't actually knocked down in the orgies of destruction in the 1950s, 60s and 70s. Why do they want to live in such places – and to visit places like them when abroad on their holidays? Because, I would suggest, their essential characteristics of harmonious proportions, of human scale and of hierarchy strike a similar chord within our hearts. These are the subtle qualities of architecture that so many people find so instinctively beautiful. We're beginning to understand that their origins lie in shared human psychology; and as new research suggests, these matters are not 'mere' aesthetics, but are intimately connected to questions of human well-being.

In all these matters, we are learning – or re-learning – just how important a well-structured built environment is to our healing, and to the health of our civilization. In the same way as Sir Tom Blundell said we have been 'running a gigantic experiment with humans and other living things as the subject', so too we have been conducting a gigantic experiment with our built environment – an experiment which is homogenizing and industrializing men's souls all over the world.

After all this you may not find it surprising that I believe it is vital we work together, across disciplines. After all, just as we cannot treat organs of the body as disconnected machines so, too, we cannot treat areas of knowledge as disconnected specialties. We must find new ways of collaborating across disciplines,

and between specialists and generalists. We must all – expert and citizen alike – explore together the areas of our collective responsibility, and shared culture. If I can play a small but perhaps provocative role of catalyst in these discussions, then I will feel I have done a useful service....

My Foundation for the Built Environment is doing very promising work in this area, working with partners from across sectors and disciplines, developing new tools and assisting with new research. I can only hope you will take up the invitation to work with them.

Instead of focussing too much of ourselves upon exciting new technological objects, as so many still do, I suggest that we need to learn to adopt the role of healers, as it were, caring for the health of the whole human environment. We need to learn to be more careful with new technology than we have in the past, and to take seriously the advice of Hippocrates: 'First, do no harm'. We need to relax our somewhat obsessive preoccupation with treating specific symptoms of diseases in isolation, but instead look at the whole – the person, the street, the town and city and our natural inheritance – together.

We have undoubtedly made wonderful advances in medicine, science and technology; conventional medicine has saved the lives of countless thousands of people. But we are struggling with the limits of what we have achieved, and struggling with the dangerous consequences of our actions, when we lose sight of the need for balance and for an understanding of our place in Nature. Today, we recognise that we can no longer treat health problems in isolation, but we have to treat the whole person. Healthcare is not just a matter of treating disease, but of preventing illness in the first place.

So there is an urgent need truly to understand the causal links of our actions. The most powerful – and painful – lesson we are being taught is that we can no longer treat our world as a collection of unrelated parts. As I have outlined, the chickens are now coming home to roost in great genetically modified flocks. I spotted them on the horizon some years ago, but the message didn't seem very welcome at the time!

Therefore we must see our world as a whole, and must carefully assess the consequences of activity in one field on that in another. The newest scientific insights, fused with traditional wisdom, are showing us that we will not be happy if we continue with this fragmentation: nor will we be well.

Nowadays it seems to be acceptable to dismiss 'traditional' knowledge as old-fashioned; as irrelevant in an age of modern science and reductionist thinking. But if I may say so, that's a rather old-fashioned, twentieth century view! Today we are learning to appreciate just how sophisticated is the disparate wisdom and knowledge that is so deeply rooted in many cultures; and, as we struggle to make for ourselves a more sustainable future, we are slowly recognizing that this kind of 'collective intelligence' is a vital, and often overlooked, resource. For instance, the human pulse was traditionally considered as much a cosmic rhythm as any other – how could it be separate? But it is the modern error of separating ourselves from the natural world that I would suggest is the cause of much contemporary confusion.

I believe that our lives can surely only be enriched through the process of integrating the knowledge of other cultures and peoples with that of our own. The vast botanical expertise of many indigenous cultures; the beautiful and complex geometries of Islamic scholars, which are rooted in the deepest universal pattern of things; the intuitive environmental knowledge of tribes that live close to the land; the ancient medicinal practices of India and China. All of them, to one degree or another, have recognized the importance of the social and environmental context when it comes to health and disease.

It will be this synthesis, I believe – the balance between the physical, the psychological and the spiritual frames of reference – that will be the basis of a new, wiser and more integrated approach. It will provide a more balanced and therefore more hopeful human future. It will be, I dare say, a new kind of modernity.

References

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