A Gandhian Model of Health: Looking at Alzheimer’s Disease

RODERIC C. WEAVER

ABSTRACT: Mahatma Gandhi was often criticized for mixing religion, politics, economics, and health. However, it was his very insistence on the fundamental interrelationship of all aspects of life that gives his ideas such relevance for today’s problems. This paper focuses on his views on health and attempts to develop a Gandhian model of health that has relevance for us today. This model is then specifically applied to the vexing problem of Alzheimer’s disease, and an ongoing therapeutic trial that is based on this model is described.

As Newsweek magazine pointed out in 1984, writings on Mahatma Gandhi and his ideas have become something of a cottage industry. This has certainly been accelerated by Sir Richard Attenborough’s film, which brought Gandhi clearly to the public consciousness. However, despite all this, it is not generally appreciated that Gandhi’s views on politics, religion, economics, and health form an inseparable whole which, although shaped by the events of Gandhi’s life, has its roots in ancient Indian culture. It is this interaction between what can be described as a “holistic” world view and the events of the twentieth century that has made his views of such relevance today.

Today many in behavioral medicine see health and disease as the interplay of mind, body, and the environment (social and physical). Although there have been many experiments and studies that support this view, a comprehensive and unified way of understanding these relationships is still lacking. The “paradigm shift” that is occurring in the physical sciences seems yet to be a long way off in the health sciences.

Just as Bayard Rustin, James Farmer, and Martin Luther King, Jr., took Gandhi’s political ideas and reinterpreted them in the American context, we can learn from and use Gandhi’s ideas on health. The value of this study is that not only does Gandhi tie together all the various elements we believe are factors in health and disease, but he also introduces issues which follow inevitably from his model but which Western medicine has yet to address.

I propose to outline a Gandhian model of health and disease and, since the importance of this model lies in the practical application of its principles, to apply it to one major disease entity: Alzheimer’s disease.

Roderic C. Weaver, M.D., is with the Division of Family and Community Medicine at the University of California in San Francisco
A health model

One of the many words used by Gautama the Buddha (250 B.C.) to describe the supreme state of enlightenment was *aroga* (*a* = without; *roga* = disease). Implicit in this seemingly negative word is an active, positive concept. Remove all that is disease, and underneath you will find the pure, unsullied state of health. Health is the harmonious interaction of the physical, mental, and spiritual aspects of our being. The foundation of this interaction is *aroga*. Disease, whether it be physical, mental, social, or spiritual, represents an imbalance in one area that will have an effect in all the other areas.

Gandhi, with his roots deep in the Indian religious experience, had a similar view of health. “Ordinarily, that man is considered healthy who eats well and moves about, and does not resort to a doctor. But a little thought will convince us that this idea is wrong.”1 “That law is that a perfect mind is responsible for perfect health of the body. A perfect mind comes from a perfect heart, not the heart known by a doctor’s stethoscope, but the heart which is the seat of God.”2 By relating perfect health to the numinous, all human activities are then relevant to the discussion of health and disease. Gandhi was, in fact, often criticized by his detractors for mixing health, religion, politics, and economics. Gandhi’s reply was: “I claim that human mind or human society is not divided into watertight compartments called social, political and religious. All act and react upon one another.”3

Gandhi postulated that perfect health was dependent on adherence to the basic spiritual laws governing the universe, particularly truth and *ahimsa* (*a* = without; *himsa* = violence). The truth is that we are all one, all life is interconnected. Implicit in this universal ecological perspective is the notion that advantage to self at the expense of others runs against this law and ultimately leads to disease. Gandhi would have no problem in seeing the relation between our habits of consumption and the starvation in the Sahel or the pollution at home.

*Ahimsa* is another seemingly negative word that connotes a positive concept. *Ahimsa* is a natural corollary to truth and, in fact, the means to its attainment. It is much more than simply refraining from killing others. It means no exploiting or injuring of others in any manner whatsoever. It is a cooperative perspective.

These laws set the wide boundaries circumscribing the territory of healthy behavior. He certainly conceived his model from a religious perspective, but it is non-dogmatic and universal. It is consonant with all of the world’s major religions and can accommodate agnostics and atheists,4 for at its core it addresses a belief in the order and connectedness of the world.

What makes Gandhi’s comments so unusual for a mystic and so useful to us is that he attended fully to the physical laws of health also. He emphasized exercise, care about diet, and good personal and community hygiene. The difference here is that he talks of pollution both of the body and of the mind. “As has already been pointed out, the preservation of our vitality is impossible without pure air, pure water, pure and wholesome food, as well as pure thoughts. So vital indeed is the relation between our health and the life that we lead, that we can never be perfectly healthy unless we lead a clean life.”5