

Let food be your medicine!



A Science of Medicine
The Art of Care

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Many years ago, Hippocrates, the Father of Medicine, stated: “*Let your food be your medicine, and your medicine be your food*”. He regarded the daily food and drink we consume as the main influence in our state of health and our vulnerability to disease. What he said still holds true today, perhaps even more so. More and more evidence is building up showing that consuming good food and drink is the bedrock of sound health; conversely, a persistently poor diet inevitably leads to one or more chronic ailments.

Tibb reckons that, apart from their nutritional value, there is no essential difference between most foods and medicine. Certain foods, especially from plants, have the same sort of therapeutic activity that herbs and medicines have; however, in foods these healing properties are milder in degree, whereas the nutritive value is higher. This conclusion is based on centuries of clinical experience and observation.

Food and drink are viewed by Tibb from two different perspectives. In one, nutrition is seen as one of the major *Lifestyle Factors*, alongside efficient breathing, regular physical activity, sound sleep practice, a sound emotional state, and efficient toxin and body waste removal. Tibb places great emphasis upon the nature and amount of food and drink we routinely consume. It firmly believes that long-term good health can only be achieved by consuming food which supports *physis*, or the person’s capacity for inner healing. In addition, it considers that most ailments arise primarily from long-term errors or poor selection in the amount, composition and quality of our daily nourishment, coupled with our eating habits.

We all have a major personal responsibility to maintain our health. Without good health, the quality of life plummets. The simplest, most effective and least costly option for achieving it is to adopt a reasonable lifestyle. Perhaps the single most important part of this a person can take is to ensure that his or her regular diet is rich in a variety of fresh fruit and vegetables, supplemented with whole grains and nuts. This has been confirmed in many studies, in both individuals and populations. Tibb goes along with this, as it fits in with its basic philosophy. However, it adds another dimension to this: it says that anyone who wants to modify their food and drink consumption should acknowledge his or her uniqueness. In Tibb, this is

measured *astemperament*. People of one specific temperament should prefer foods with certain qualities; people of a different temperament should select foods with different qualities.

From the other perspective, good, sensible nutrition can actively empower a patient in improving his or her condition. Simple, practical dietary adjustments often help in the treatment of numerous diseases, using foods which reverse any underlying imbalance in qualities, and which take the patient's temperament into account. A good example is the recent study which noted that adopting the so-called Mediterranean Diet (which is rich in fresh seasonal fruits, leafy vegetables and olive oil) can lead to impressive reductions in the risk of developing heart diseases, inflammatory conditions and even cancer. The recognised presence of certain components in these foods, such as anti-oxidants and substances which improve the immune response, is now accepted as being responsible.

The practice of using food and drink to contribute to the treatment or prevention of specific diseases is now gaining momentum. It may be effective alone; however, using food together with other forms of treatment, whether by herbal or conventional medicine, appears to work best. In essence, consuming specific foods is encouraged, and omitting deleterious foods discouraged. We have known for some time that a diet high in salt is a recipe for disaster, as it encourages the development of hypertension, and the catastrophic heart, brain and kidney problems that often ensue. Also, the high consumption of foods rich in fat has also been highlighted as a promoter of cancers and coronary heart disease. Measures to limit their intake have reaped rich rewards in many countries, as the number of strokes, heart attacks and kidney failure has fallen dramatically.

Yet more support for treating patients with chronic disorders with dietary changes emerged recently. A number of patients with heart disease improved dramatically, and this was recorded by state-of-the-art scanning techniques. This was an unexpected result, as the patient usually gets worse and worse. Improving the patient's eating habits can reap huge benefits, even without drugs or surgery.

One important aspect of lifestyle improvement related to diet is water, or the lack of it. This has a particular impact on South Africans, as chronic dehydration can bring with it a myriad of health concerns. It is the vital element in maintaining virtually every process in the body, from digestion and absorption of food, to metabolism of the nutrients and the elimination of waste products. A mere 2% fall in our body's water content can cause fatigue, and trigger dehydration, leading to deteriorating memory, thinking and vision. Maintaining optimum water balance in the body is a basic tenet of dietotherapy.

Tibb therefore offers two distinct options for the food we eat: first, it helps maintain good health by reinforcing the benefits of a healthy diet. Second, it supplies information on how to deal with chronic disorders by reasonable adjustments to the diet by the process of dietotherapy.

A final word of wisdom from the Father of Medicine is therefore appropriate: *"Leave your drugs in the chemist's pot if you can heal the patient with food."*