

# Functional Medicine

*A new approach in treatment—bringing hope to patients with unexplained symptoms*

By Catherine A. Waller, M.D.

Countless patients go to the doctor every year with a multitude of symptoms ranging from fatigue, headache and joint pain, to muscle aches, insomnia and mood swings; only to be told that all of their tests are “normal.” They are declared “healthy” and sent on their way, or labeled as having a *functional illness*—a term used by some traditional medicine physicians meaning *the patient has a psychiatric illness such as stress or hypochondriasis causing their symptoms*. Frustrated, these patients are left with few options or suggestions as to how to help themselves feel better.

Some just accept their fate and suffer in silence, assuming that it is just *old age*. Others refuse to be placated and hit the Internet in search of answers. The lucky ones stumble upon a new paradigm shift in medicine called *Functional Medicine*. Its name is derived from the term *functional illness* —but instead of assuming there’s nothing wrong with the patient, Functional Medicine assumes that something was wrong with the diagnostic testing process, and most likely, there is a subtle malfunction in the biological processes of the patient, missed by traditional diagnostic testing.

The forefathers of traditional medicine created a division of the human body into organ systems (... cardiovascular, neurological, pulmonary, urologic, endocrine,

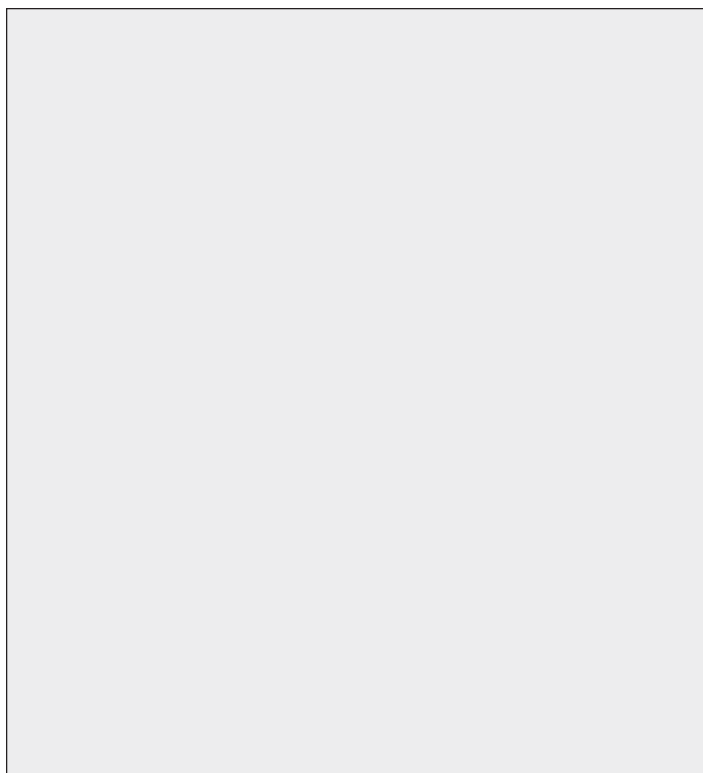


intestinal etc.). As our medical knowledge has broadened over the last 5-10 years, however, we have learned more about the biochemical processes that go on in the body, and it has become clear that the “organ system” classification is inadequate. It just does not represent how the body actually works.

The body is actually one large matrix of interconnected biochemical processes that affect *all* of the organ systems. When these processes are all working well, there is health and vitality. If one of them is malfunctioning, the entire body is affected. If the malfunction goes on long enough symptoms will begin. If symptoms go on for any length of

## **The 8 Major Areas of Clinical Imbalance Addressed by Functional Medicine:**

1. Immune & Inflammatory Balance
2. Energy Production (Mitochondrial Dysfunction) & Oxidative Stress (Free Radicals)
3. Gastrointestinal Imbalance
4. Detoxification & Biotransformation
5. Hormonal & Neurotransmitter Imbalance
6. Structural Imbalance (Musculoskeletal & Energy Flow)
7. Mind and Spirit (Stress Levels, Attitudes & Beliefs)
8. Environmental Inputs (Diet, Nutrition, Genetics, Exercise)



*When the body's processes are all working well, there is health and vitality. If one of them is malfunctioning, the entire body is affected.*

time, disease will usually occur.

Here is an example of how the malfunction of a biological process can affect every organ system: The immune system's job is to recognize *friend* from *foe* and to mount an attack against all *foes*. One of the ways it does this is by increasing inflammation, which calls into action a variety of cells and chemicals, whose job it is to destroy the "invader."

Inflammation is like a fire...if it gets out of control it can damage the entire body. Recent studies have shown that excess inflammation is a causative factor in *all* of our major chronic diseases...heart disease, hypertension, peripheral vascular disease, diabetes, obesity, osteoporosis, Alzheimer's and cancer. We can measure the level of inflammation in a patient's body with a simple blood test called a high sensitivity CRP (C-

reactive protein), but that doesn't tell us the source of the inflammation.

Excess inflammation has many causes—including chronic infection, allergies (food or environmental), lack of oxygen to tissues, free radicals (oxidative stress), exposure to toxins, insulin resistance, and obesity.

We can separate the main biological processes into categories, but it is important not to lose sight of the fact that they are interdependent—they interact and affect each other continuously.

There are many diagnostic tools available to the functional medicine physician, to help him/her assess each of these areas of biological functioning. These tools are largely unknown to traditional physicians, but have been available for over 20 years.

The job of a Functional Medicine physician is to assess each of the 8 areas and make recommendations on how to repair and/or improve their functioning. Returning patients to health requires reversing or substantially improving the specific dysfunctions that have contributed to the disease state and symptoms. Those dysfunctions are, for each of us, the result of lifelong interactions among our environment, our lifestyle, and our genetic predisposition's. Each patient, therefore, represents a unique, com-

plex and interwoven set of influences that has set the stage for the development of disease or the maintenance of health.

Conventional medicine normally acts when a diagnosis can be made, or when signs and symptoms are severe enough (or the patient is persistent enough) to demand a clinical intervention. Functional medicine physicians focus on restoring balance to the dysfunctional systems by strengthening the fundamental physiologic processes that underlie them and by adjusting the environmental inputs that nurture or impair them. This approach leads to therapies that focus on restoring health and function, rather than simply controlling signs and symptoms. With this new approach to medicine, patients with unexplained symptoms have hope again. Their *functional* illness is a perfect match for a Functional Medicine physician.

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