

The Ayurvedic View on Immunity and Vaccinations

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Abstract

Ayurveda's understanding of immunity is mostly basic and commonsensical. A robust immune system is the result of good general health. Good health is multifactorial and depends upon genes, age, diet, lifestyle and environment. It cannot, of course, be achieved by merely popping the much publicised 'ayurvedic immunity-boosters'!

This ancient medical system has historically been practical and non-ideological. Charaka plainly states that the sole condition for an intervention to qualify as therapy is its proven ability to restore health. As such, Ayurveda has no philosophical opposition to the idea of vaccinations. This is not to say that vaccine overuse should go unchecked. There are problems in this area that need to be addressed.

Keywords: Ayurveda, immunity, vaccination, vedic philosophy, bala, ayurvedic immunity boosters

Vedic philosophy has had a deep influence on Ayurveda's approach to both health promotion and illness management. A holistic understanding of Ayurvedic concepts requires that their philosophical roots be unravelled first.

Philosophical Background

An aggressive conquest of nature or a life-negating escape from it have never been the cherished Vedic ideals. Transcending the limitations of nature, on the other hand, by self-enhancement is the ideal that the Vedas uphold. This self-enhancement, it is vital to note, is to be accomplished by a worshipful reliance upon the more abiding aspects of nature itself.^[1,2] Culture is the fulfilment of nature and not its negation. This philosophical ripeness operating in the medical context produced the central doctrine of Ayurveda in illness-management: *Balaadhishtaanam arogyam, arogyarthah kriyaakramah.*^[3]

Illness is to be approached first by trying to support and induce the natural self-healing processes (*Bala*) of the body. It is this orientation towards salutogenesis rather than pathogenesis that makes Ayurvedic treatment gentle and holistic.^[4] Medicine is meant to assist and not substitute the body's natural healing processes. The importance of this orientation in this age of medical aggression and iatrogenic ailments cannot be over emphasized.

The thrust upon salutogenesis ipso facto denounces the uni-pronged partial approach of 'a pill for every ill'. It leads to a holism that shifts emphasis from medical treatment to patient benefit. Anything that can ensure patient benefit, from diet and literature to space and time, become medically employable. That Ayurveda can realize this employability in a manner that is rational is one of the triumphs of its *tridosha* theory and the related concept of *dosha-prakriti*.

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Bala and its Types

The Sanskrit word *bala* literally means strength. A reduced susceptibility to diseases as also the body's ability to recover from them - *vyadhikshamatva* - are dependent upon it.^[5] *Ojas*, a reddish white viscous fluid located primarily in the heart, was speculated to be the biochemical entity responsible for *bala*.^[6] Ayurveda's conception of the physiology underlying immune function revolves basically around its speculations on *ojas*. While such speculations are mostly irrelevant for patient care, some clinically useful and insightful observations interspersed between them should not be lost sight of. Only such insights are covered in this article.

Health, vitality and immunity are all dependent on *bala*. Fitness and functional status of the individual are the principal markers that help in its assessment.^[7] Malnutrition, emotional stressors like anger and grief, excessive physical exertion, and injuries are all supposed to deplete it. Therapeutic measures aimed specifically to counter the cause of depletion are expected to restore its normalcy.

Vagbhata, the sixth century summariser of the ayurvedic classics, classifies *bala* into three types:^[8]

1. **Sahaja bala (Natural strength):** *Sahaja bala* refers to inborn strength of the body and mind; it varies among individuals. Those with the *kapha* body-type, for instance, are naturally stronger than those with the *vata* body-type; those with the *pitta* body-type rank in between.
2. **Kalakrita-bala (Time-dependent strength):** Age is a major factor that determines strength and fitness. Youth is strength and senility, weakness. Seasonal factors too are counted under *kalakrita-bala*. The cooler seasons restore strength whereas the sultry ones deplete it. This is only a general rule and disease-specific variations in body's defences are to be expected. For instance, *vata-kapha jwara* (flu-like illnesses) would not be as much of a scourge during the warmer months as during rains.
3. **Yuktikrita-bala (Acquired strength):** This is what an individual develops by paying careful attention to the three pillars of health namely, healthy food habits, restful night-time sleep and mental hygiene. [9] Raghavan Thirumalpad, an ayurvedic scholar, has updated this list with another fourth pillar - regular physical exercise.^[10,11] Daily use of a health-promoting *rasayana* like *Triphala* is also counted as a means of enhancing *yuktikrita-bala*.^[12]

In short, Ayurveda's understanding of immunity is mostly basic and commonsensical. A robust immune system is the result of good general health. Good health is multi-factorial and depends upon genes, age, diet, lifestyle and environment. It cannot, of course, be achieved by merely popping the much publicized 'ayurvedic immunity-boosters'!

Ayurvedic View on Vaccinations

Ayurveda has historically been a practical and non-ideological system. As Charaka plainly states: "The sole condition for an intervention to qualify as therapy is its proven ability to restore health".^[13] Although Ayurveda advocates the principles of safe and conservative prescribing, it has never shied away from incorporating efficacious drugs and procedures even when they carried some risks.^[14] Only, it mandates that these risks be carefully recorded and appropriately minimized. Chakrapanidatta's (11th century) monumental inclusion of mercurials within the Ayurvedic pharmacopoeia is an eloquent testimony to this tradition of practicality and inclusivity.

As such, Ayurveda has no philosophical opposition to the idea of vaccinations. Although no ayurvedic classic refers to the practice of inoculation, renowned scholars of the twentieth century like Bhaskar Govind Ghanekar and Pandit Shiv Sharma have attempted to show how the idea of vaccinating people against epidemics is in harmony with the classical Ayurvedic view.^[15] Shiv Sharma, in fact, alludes to the practice of inoculation against smallpox that existed in Bengal in the nineteenth century and had been in existence for hundreds of years.^[16] Needless to add, vaccine hesitancy that has been unabashedly receiving fillip from some ayurvedic practitioners is unjustifiable.

This is not to say that vaccine overuse should go unchecked. There are problems in this area that need to be addressed. One theory to explain the reason for the increase in prevalence of asthma among children is that the widespread use of vaccines and antibiotics has shifted the activity of lymphocytes from fighting infection to releasing chemical substances that inadvertently promote the development of allergies.^[17] Such possibilities ought not to go unstudied and uncorrected. Ayurveda's caution is relevant here too: "Therapeutics which settles one disease while triggering another is flawed; proper treatment is that which settles a disease while giving rise to no other."^[18]

There is an ethical dimension also to the vaccination issue. Commercial interests of the big pharma mar-

good science. They can create drugs for diseases that don't even exist!^[19] Expecting this hugely moneyed industry not to indulge in profiteering is perhaps quixotic. The onus therefore is upon physicians and medical academics to work on the side of good science. As Charaka instructed millennia ago, "Bhuta-daya, compassion for suffering humanity, should be the singular motive for medical practice. A physician should ever resist the lures of money."^[20]

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