



A long-lived path to health

Ayurvedic medicine is 5000 years old and still in good shape.

WELLBEING CLAIRE SCOBIE

SHAUN MATTHEWS was a young medical doctor when he stumbled across Ayurveda, the ancient Indian system of medicine.

"I was working as a GP in Chatswood," he says. "Patients would come to me with minor health problems. Invariably their blood tests would come back as normal and I'd reassure them they didn't have any serious disease. Despite 10 years of training in allopathic medicine, it was very unsatisfying that I couldn't advise any particular treatment."

Matthews, 50, is the founder of the Ayurvedic Medicine Department at Nature Care College in Sydney. He specialises in the holistic treatment of chronic illness. "It seemed clear that mind and emotions were inextricably linked with physical health," he says.

Indian-born doctor Deepak Chopra popularised Ayurveda in the early 1990s with his best-selling book *Ageless Body, Timeless Mind* and its seductive message of eternal youth. Chopra was one of the first mind-body theorists to draw on Ayurveda - literally "science of life".

Since then, the beauty and spa industries have taken up Ayurvedic massage. Herbal shampoos, Vedic jam and calming tea bags are also widely available.

"Yoga and Ayurveda are like two wings of a body," explains Farida Irani, initiator of the 2nd International Ayurveda and Yoga Conference in Sydney next week. Inspired by her own teacher, Professor P. H. Kulkarni from Pune in India, Irani - an Ayurvedic practitioner - hopes this gathering of experts will raise awareness about "these two sister sciences" and their validity as complementary health care.

While Ayurvedic beauty care focuses on self-massage with herbal oils, a change in diet can produce startling results. "Ayurveda looks at the energetics of food - how it's

grown and stored," says Matthews, who runs Ayurvedic cooking classes and has treated clients with cancer, multiple sclerosis and chronic fatigue. "It's important to eat fresh and make food a ritual, not just eat takeaway in front of the TV."

In Ayurveda, the three bodily types are vata, pitta and kapha and each person is born with a particular constitution. If you eat, sleep, exercise and "be" according to your particular type, you can stay healthy. One of the doctrine's key principles is that each person must listen to his or her intuition and Dhanvantari - the "divine healer within".

Aside from lifestyle changes, Ayurveda encourages a change in attitude through meditation. "Meditation helps people move beyond the pain and suffering to experience calmness, compassion, serenity and gratitude," says H. H. Paramhans Swami Maheshwarananda, founder of Yoga In Daily Life and co-patron of the conference.

Petrea King, director of the Quest For Life Foundation in the Southern Highlands, who has helped thousands of Australians living with trauma and life-threatening illnesses, is bringing her experience as a cancer survivor, yoga and meditation teacher to the talks.

"[Ayurveda] is a way for people to come to know their essential nature, then know peace again," she says. "People live habitually until they meet one of the 'Ds' - divorce, death, drama, depression or debt. We ascribe feelings to financial markets, such as 'Wall Street was buoyant yesterday' but we've lost confidence in the values that underpin our economy - feelings of what is fair, just or equitable."

Ramkumar, who is travelling to the conference from southern India where Ayurveda is practised in about 80 per cent of villages,



believes financial stress is a direct outcome of greed. "We spend half our lives destroying our health to create wealth and the remainder of our lives spending our wealth to regain health," he says.

Ramkumar, whose organisation Punarnava Ayurveda promotes universal wellbeing, is building a prototype Ayurvedic hospital in Coimbatore – an industrial area in southern India – according to principles of environmental sustainability. This stems from the idea that everything is interdependent.

As humans are made up of a combination of elements – vata (air or ether), pitta (fire and water) and kapha (earth and water) – so is the universe.

These can be challenging concepts for a Western mind. But as Ramkumar points out: "Do people understand everything about allopathy? The considerable propagation of the Western pharmaceutical industry has ensured that people develop blind faith in its methods and practices irrespective of whether they truly understand it or not."

Despite decade-long research trials at the National Centre for Complementary and Alternative Medicine at the US National Institutes of Health, Ayurveda is only gradually gaining recognition among the Western medical fraternity. In the documentary *The Enemies Of Reason*, British scientist Professor Richard Dawkins says: "The idea that ancient equals years of accumulated wisdom is a fallacy ... resuscitating Ayurveda is rather like bringing back bleeding with leeches."

Kulkarni, now 75 and known as the "grandfather of Ayurveda", laughs when I ask him how much is based on superstition. "There's no magic in Ayurveda. There are certain principles laid down 5000 years back. Anyone can come and test them. Even though I've been practising it for over 40 years, I'm still a student. I cannot finish my studies in one lifetime. It is eternal." **Second International Ayurveda and Yoga Conference, April 3-5, City Recital Hall, Sydney, see ayaaustralia.org or yogaindailylife.org.au**

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Be it on your head ... the ancient practice advocates massage and meditation.