

HELPING PEOPLE TO SELF-ACTUALIZE:
REVISING THE ROLE AND GOAL OF OUR
HEALTHCARE SYSTEM

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GUEST EDITORIAL

Helping People to Self-Actualize: Revising the Role and Goal of Our Healthcare System

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Our current healthcare system operates on a definition of healthcare that is generally confined to treating disease and addressing traumatic physical events. In fact, most modern dictionaries define health as “the state of being free from injury or illness.”

The challenge with this definition, however, is that how we *define* health influences how we *practice* healthcare, both on an individual and a population level.

Health was not always defined so narrowly. Hippocrates developed a medical system based on a definition of health “as a state of dynamic equilibrium between the internal and the external environment.”¹ The patient was intimately involved as he considered both the physical and social determinants of health. He believed that the natural healing force within us is the greatest healing force of all and that the chief role of the physician was to help restore health and harmony to the patient.²

Over time, as science focused more and more on the physical causes of disease and illness, who the patient was became less important and the definition of health narrowed.

The first modern attempt in the West to recreate an expanded view of health was articulated by the World Health Organization (WHO). The WHO defines health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.”³

But as recently pointed out by Max Huber et al in an article in the *British Medical Journal*, the WHO definition also exerts an unwitting influence that may actually be detrimental. They argue that the requirement for *complete* health defines most people as actually unhealthy most of the time. It “supports the tendencies of the medical, technology and drug industries to redefine diseases, expanding the scope of the healthcare system. New screening technologies detect abnormalities at levels

¹ Taunis Tauntus, The historical origins of the basic concepts of health promotion and education: the role of ancient Greek philosophy and medicine. *Health Promotion International*. 2009, Vol. 24, Issue 2, Pp. 185-192.

² http://www.greekmedicine.net/whos_who/Hippocrates.html. Accessed 2 August 2016.

³ <http://www.who.int/about/definition/en/print.html>. Accessed 31 May 2016.

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