

# Members' Newsletter

July 2014

**BHMA**  
British Holistic Medical Association

Chair: Dr William House

[www.bhma.org](http://www.bhma.org)

## Statins for well people?

**Behind this skirmish in the biomedical high command is a much bigger struggle – which may be going our way**



The battle lines are drawn. In the blue corner, the University of Oxford Clinical Trial and Epidemiological Studies Unit in the person of Professor Rory Collins, currently supported by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) and the Cochrane Collaboration. In the red corner, the British Medical Journal (BMJ), in the person of the editor, Dr Fiona Godlee.

This is not biomedicine versus the rest. These are two camps within the biomedical world. You could call it a civil war of words – at least mostly civil. Much is at stake, principally the prospect of offering to well people long term medications because of a statistical risk of cardiovascular disease (CVD – heart attack and stroke) sometime in the future.

The blue corner claims it is 'to prevent many lives from being destroyed'. The red corner calls it the 'medicalization of life'.

The trigger for this bout was the publication in February 2014 of NICE's proposal to recommend systematic screening for risk of cardiovascular disease in all people aged 40-74yrs. Then offering statins to those with a risk of 10% or more over 10 years (rather than 20% as now). This would involve an extra 5 million people taking statins – making a total of 12 million including those already taking them. Is this the future we want for our society? Is this sustainable?

A part from an open letter from eight distinguished medics calling on NICE and Jeremy Hunt to reverse the recommendation, press attention has been diverted through Rory Collins towards two BMJ articles from October 2013!

**"The BMJ is an ally of holistic medicine and the journal is under attack."**

One was reminding us that it is fast food and not saturated fat that is the dietary culprit in causing CVD. The other questioned the supposed benefits from statins in well people.



So both articles challenged the holy grail of biomedicine. But the complaints from Collins were not about the substantive content, but rather an acknowledged error in the quoted statin side-effect rate. The BMJ is accused of being careless and of campaigning against medicalization, rather than being a dispassionate scientific journal. This is obviously a diversionary tactic and does no credit to anyone. The two chief funders of Rory Collins' biomedical research into CVD - the pharmaceutical companies and the British Heart Foundation (BHF) – seem to have taken cover and allowed their Oxford protégé to fight the battle.

### **"Science doesn't do 'balance' or relationships or meaning..."**

So what is a holist to make of all this? Firstly, it's very sad. The BMJ is an ally of holistic medicine and the journal is under attack. They have been speaking against the medicalization of life for at least 15 years. As for those at the top of the cardiology establishment, their reductionist approach to the whole problem of heart disease and stroke is letting us all down. The scientific method, when applied to medicine, mostly focuses on identifying metabolic pathways that can be modified with drugs, on finding chemical markers in the blood stream, and on isolating individual dietary components that can be labelled as 'the culprit'. As for the benefit of meditation, social connection and sense of purpose, these remain fringe topics, though less fringe than they once were. Science doesn't do 'balance' or relationships or meaning, nor does it engage with people's motivation to care for themselves and for others. It is also entangled with big business and, therefore, with politics.

The elephant in the room is, of course, the nation's appalling diet, sedentary lifestyle and vicious cycles of stress and substance abuse, all aggravated by income inequality. These cry out for action at all levels of society. So why are the politicians and regulators so ineffectual over this 'elephant'? Surely because of a similar set of short term vested interests that diverts so much funding to biomedical science: interests that have the dual purpose of promoting the jobs and tax revenues generated

by the industry, whilst providing the 'fixes' that keep workers struggling on. To their huge credit, the BMJ (in the red corner) manages to fight for holistic practice despite being reliant on Pharma funding through selling advertising space. For instance, they are co-sponsors of the (now fully booked) International Preventing Overdiagnosis Conference in Oxford this September at which the BHMA will be presenting a workshop on alternatives to diagnosis. If the BMJ can do this, so can the politicians. The nation is looking for leadership and effective regulation of offenders, especially the food industry. Squabbling over statistics in scientific articles is fiddling while Rome burns.

\* Comments very welcome: <http://j.mp/bhma-nl> \*

### **Kindness**

by Fiona Hamilton

it was not messages of hope and encouragement that sowed themselves most deeply

nor rallying cries, pep talks  
certainty or facts

it was, instead, a human pollen of words  
borne on winds by strangers telling their own fragility

it was the expert who said she didn't have the answers  
and allowed for quiet

it was the friend who looked you in the eye  
for more than a blink or two, as if to say, come in

it was a smile illuminating a corridor or a whole day  
it was dark humour daring you to tightrope-walk in tandem

it was hands held out unexpectedly  
when you were falling

it was wisdom served simply  
like good food

it was repetition and persistence  
and nothing that would win prizes

it was all these and something  
so ordinary you nearly missed it

a pinch of dried yeast  
fermenting in darkness

promising nothing more spectacular  
than a loaf of bread

# **YOGA AND HEALTH: RESEARCH AND PRACTICE**

**BUYING IN  
OR SELLING OUT?**

**4, 5 and 6 April 2014, LONDON**

This remarkable conference raised serious questions about integrating Eastern practices into Western healthcare: is this the tender embrace of a long lost cousin, or the kiss of a vampire?

**A**t the beginning of April 2014 Confer staged this three day international conference. There were 129 delegates listed in the programme. I (WH) was there for the first day with another BHMA trustee, Dr Thuli Whitehouse, attending all three days. The setting was the elegant Brunei Gallery, next to the School of Oriental and African Studies in Bloomsbury, Central London, the heart of the University of London.

The very fact that this conference took place at all is a credit to Confer. It is not their usual territory. They were set up to 'provide innovative, challenging and inspiring continuing educational events for psychotherapists, psychologists and other mental health workers'. There were only three items in the programme explicitly about mental health: stress at work, insomnia and depression. Most of the workshops and presentations concerned common, long term somatic conditions, particularly heart disease, cancer and chronic pain. The two keynote presentations on the first day were impressive. Sat Bir S. Khalsa, with his white robe, white beard and turban looked every bit the Yogi, though he is actually Assistant Professor of Medicine at Harvard Medical School. The other was Lorenzo Cohen from the University of Texas. Both are distinguished researchers.

Several things struck me forcefully. First, the extraordinary depth and breadth of research into the effects of Yoga practice on human physiology and disease. I was one of many delegates to be shocked by this. Perhaps my shock is unsurprising since Yoga, as a treatment modality, has barely penetrated

the NHS. Accordingly, none of the keynote speakers were based in the UK - most were from N. America and the remainder from Continental Europe.

Secondly, I was struck by the style and language of the presentations. The research methodology was identical to that used for mainstream biomedical research. I could easily imagine I was listening to the results of randomized controlled trials of the latest chemotherapeutic agent for cancer, or a new wonder-drug for heart disease. Yoga was treated as just another (rather effective) intervention. At no point was there any mention of the philosophical and spiritual aspects of Yoga. It was as if Yoga as a way of being and relating had been air-brushed away leaving a sanitized version suitable for our materialistic culture.

**"Eastern-derived practices are filleted of their indigestible cultural and spiritual bones"**

When I and some others questioned this we were told by Heather Mason (The Minded Institute) that it was necessary 'to speak their language': no debate. It later emerged that there were plans to garner support within the UK to lobby parliament for wider recognition of Yoga as part of the medical armory.

**S**uppose that 'Yoga therapy' becomes a NICE-approved modality for the treatment of a variety of clinical conditions. What would this be like? Bear in mind that NICE-approved treatments need to be reproducible and

measurable so that quality standards can be defined and commissioners can be assured that the intervention is ‘evidence-based’. Another way of characterizing this is to say that Eastern-derived practices are filleted of their indigestible cultural and spiritual bones and eyeballs, and packaged into a tradeable and quality-assured commodity. Something like this has happened to NHS-provided acupuncture, mindfulness-based meditation and religion. They become another tool, perhaps a different diet sheet: shadows of what they could be.

*Sat Bir S Khalsa,  
Assistant Professor of  
Medicine at Harvard  
Medical School. He is  
a human physiologist  
and neuro-scientist fully  
engaged in basic and  
clinical research into  
yoga effectiveness for  
over 10 years.*



Will we be better off with this version of Yoga on the NHS? Is it better than no Yoga at all? The commodification is done so that it will not threaten our materialistic and consumerist culture. But in my view, if Yoga’s philosophy and spirituality were blended with the best of our own culture, light would shine upon us. I see the people thirsting for new ways of understanding the world and their place within it, of finding meaning, peace, a sustainable future in our often fraught and fragmented communities. We should be open to learning from the East.

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## Brief News

### NHS ranked top of eleven countries

The latest international healthcare quality survey from the Commonwealth Fund based in New York places the NHS as overall top performing healthcare system amongst 11 industrialised countries. It is also the least expensive per capita. The USA is both worst performer overall and the most expensive.

The big question is, of course, WHY?

*Detail from Commonwealth Fund ranking chart.  
Rows indicate (from top): Overall ranking, Effective Care and Coordinated Care. (Based on 2013 data)*

	NOR	SWE	SWIZ	UK	US
7	3	2	1	11	
11	10	3	1	5	
11	10	8	1	3	

What are we getting so right compared to the others? There are no definitive answers to these questions, but it seems very likely that the UK’s longstanding socialized, collaborative and universal system, with well-developed primary care, accounts for a large part of the NHS’s success. We can also say that the prime example of an overwhelmingly competitive and commercial system provided and controlled by corporate multinationals in the USA is not the best way and we should not be reforming our NHS using the USA as a model. [[http://www.commonwealthfund.org/~media/files/publications/fund-report/2014/jun/1755\\_davis\\_mirror\\_mirror\\_2014.pdf](http://www.commonwealthfund.org/~media/files/publications/fund-report/2014/jun/1755_davis_mirror_mirror_2014.pdf)]

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### Obesity: reductionism gone mad?

The lower limit of body mass index for gastric band surgery in patients with obesity and recent onset type 2 diabetes could fall from 35 to 30 - making around 800,000 people eligible for this expensive and invasive procedure. I guess the cost-effectiveness sums done by NICE suggest that the nation would be better off economically by doing this. Diabetes is so harmful, so expensive for all of us and of epidemic proportions - around 1 in 3 UK adults have ‘pre-diabetic’ blood chemistry. But what does this desperate measure tell us about our society? It is surely reductionism gone mad! We clamp down on the stomach instead of clamping down on the junk food industry! We will be operating on the wrong people. We need holistic policies like never before and the political courage, combined with compassion, to implement them. I can’t see this happening until enough ordinary folk, backed by informed and cohesive communities, demand politicians who are ready to do it!

William House, Chair, BHMA

\* Comments: <http://j.mp/bhma-nl> \*