

East Meets West

With one foot rooted in modern medicine and the other in a practice 5,000 years old, Nita Desai is an M.D. on the edge.



IT IS A sunny spring afternoon, and the small waiting room of Dr. Nita Desai's Boulder medical office is, as usual, crammed full of patients—mothers and children, middle-aged businessmen in suits, a college student from the University of Colorado. Some are here because they've heard tell of her success in treating ailments that Western medicine, incapable of getting to the root of, has instead surrounded with moats of pills: chronic sinus conditions, colitis, hypertension, diabetes, and arthritis, to name but a few. Others have already made the shift to Eastern medicine, and are here for their annual checkup. All of them have arrived for the chance to consult with Colorado's only woman M.D. who is also a licensed practitioner of the traditional Indian medicine called ayurveda. It is a distinction shared by only five medical doctors in the entire United States.

While a pair of ducks circles with hypnotic regularity in the pond outside the windows, the patients busy themselves filling out long forms which, oddly for a doctor's office, have extensive questions about things like the exact nature of the kind of sleep they've had, the breakfast they ate, the temperatures at which they feel most comfortable by day. A wall away from the scribbling patients, the examining room is a surprise. No antiseptic paper-covered steel divan. No pressure cuff or glass-fronted cabinets. Instead, a disarmingly unmedical array of low chairs, a rice-paper screen, and a couch. It is there that Desai, a twinkly, elfin woman in her early 40s, takes

a few minutes out of her busy practice to answer an interviewer's questions about a type of medicine that has the distinction of being at the same time among the hippest treatment modalities of the moment and also the oldest. Perhaps because she sits at the fault line of two large, not necessarily reconcilable medical systems, Desai, below her effervescence, has an edge.


"People are overmedicated in this country, and this is partly the fault of drug companies and advertising," she says flatly. "You watch TV and you're told that if you have heartburn you can take X, if you suffer from impotence Y, and for hypertension, you've simply got to have Z. After watching 30 minutes of this you feel you have to call your doctor, because even if you didn't think there was

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anything wrong with you when you began, by the time you've finished this barrage of ads you're not so certain!"

Desai, who is of Indian origin but grew up in the States, began her career as a traditional doctor of family medicine working in the Denver area. It was not long, however, before she came to understand the limitations of her Western education. "I soon realized that 80 percent of what came in I couldn't help, or if I did, could do so only symptomatically. As a family practitioner, a lot of what you see are varieties of stress and depression, even in children, all of which often pass below the official diagnostic radar and yet are important to treat. In Western medicine, there are no good treatments for migraines. Likewise irritable bowel syndrome and sinusitis. What there is is a massive concentration on the physical exterior, which produces that lovely, peculiarly American phenomenon of the depressed triathlete."

But what about the huge American medical



Animal Lodge Web Cam Ham, 2006.

ER visit – late night cat fight, 2000.


MRI for back pain, 2005.

Switched to leaner food, 2003.

"Fixed" 1999.

Blew knee out, surgery 2005. Underwater treadmill therapy, 2006.

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establishment, with its gleaming buildings, its up-to-the-minute technology, its scores of educated physicians who are the envy of the world?

"Look, Western medicine is great for emergencies," Desai says. "If you have a car crash you want an emergency room and a trauma surgeon; you don't care about bedside manner and someone giving you herbs. You want to have your life or limbs saved. But Western medicine is weak at solving the issue of chronic problems, because these problems tend to arrive from larger somatic or energy imbalances, and that is exactly where ayurveda comes in."

Put simply, ayurveda identifies essential body characteristics using a decidedly un-Western examination of fingernails, face, tongue, and "pulse diagnosis." (Up to 108 separate and distinct pulses can be read by the skilled practitioner, providing a low-tech but extremely effective X-ray of the body's internal systems.) Once the final diagnosis is established, specific herbs, oils, and dietary modifications are prescribed.

Dr. Robert Ivker, a physician and author of the best-selling book *Sinus Survival*, and who has practiced medicine in the Denver area for 34 years, explains, "Ayurveda takes into account the body type and the mental and emotional component of the person, and this, in turn, has a major impact on therapeutic outcomes. Ayurveda has had consistent, striking success in treating chronic illnesses ranging from sinusitis, which is the most common chronic ailment in America, to arthritis, diabetes, back pain, and migraines, among many others."

Later that same day in Dr. Desai's office, the curtain covering the mysteries of ayurveda is parted to admit "Ethan," along with his mother, "Anne," who enter the examining room having run out of Western medical options. Ethan has the skinny, freckled looks of the boy next door—if the boy next door had obsessively played an Internet-wide computer game called an MMORPG (Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game) for six hours a day for an entire year. Upon giving up the game cold turkey, Ethan entered a twilight phase of insomnia, irritability, social withdrawal, and lack of concentration. "Stuff isn't as fun as it used to be," he now says in a soft voice, sitting down in a chair as his fortysomething mother looks on worriedly. "I'm kinda down. I can't fall asleep and I get anxiety attacks when I wake up."

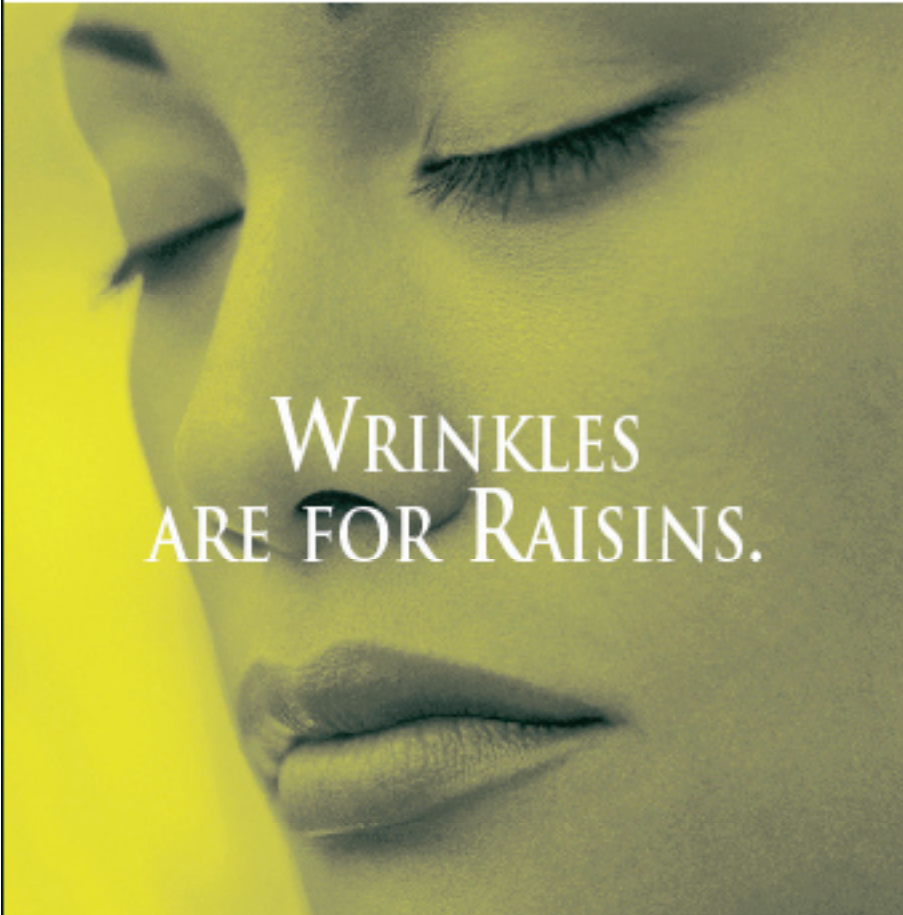
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mens, ayurveda (the word is Sanskrit and means approximately “life science”) sees the patient in the round, as an engine powered by pistons of body, mind, and spirit working together. To that end, and guided by the extensive form that Ethan has already filled out, Desai now begins that part of the diagnostic procedure which is one of the keys to ayurveda, the personal interview. It is a far cry from the cursory standard questions with which Western doctors typically greet new patients, and ranges from the exact circumstances of his birth to the typical components of his daily diet. From there, while keeping up a bright, engaged patter designed to put Ethan at his ease, she widens the focus further to include his emotional life, the upheavals of recent times, and the plausible reasons behind his social withdrawal into the mists of Internet gaming.

When the 40-minute interview is done, she examines his nails, noticing small white spots that are “consistent with mineral deficiencies.” She examines his tongue and his face, making notes on a chart. Then she gently takes his wrist in her hand, and for a quarter of an hour or so “listens” attentively to the signals of pulses from deep within his body. In the discussion that follows, her diagnoses are startlingly precise.

“You’ve had many antibiotics” (for the various strep throats to which he was prone as a child), “with the result that your liver is sick. Additionally, there is an overgrowth of candida in the lower intestine, also in part from the antibiotics. The lungs are weak, and the adrenal system is exhausted from stress. The stomach process is sluggish.”

There is a pause, while the child and mother digest this. Desai then goes on to speak of the specific diet he will require (no fast food, no sugars, lots of “good oils”) and the exact herbs he will take three times a day to ground his depleted nervous system and rebuild his body.

After the patient and his grateful mother have gone, she’s in a reflective mood. “Ayurveda,” she says, “is so beautiful because it’s so simple and clear, and at the same time so easily individualized. It’s the mother of all medicines, because it’s 5,000 years old. Arabic, Greek, and Chinese medicine come from it. So, in a sense, coming to ayurveda is coming back to the source.” ▲

Eli Gottlieb is a novelist and former senior editor at ELLE magazine. He lives in Boulder.

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