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Interviews with the dead

Using meta-life qualitative analysis to validate Hippocrates' theory of humours

Abstract

Background: Hippocrates devised his theory of the 4 humours (blood, phlegm, black bile and yellow bile) 24 centuries ago. Since then, medicine has evolved into a complex body of confusing and sometimes contradictory facts. The authors, seeing a need to determine the validity of his theory, hired a psychic.

Methods: The psychic interviewed 4 eminent ancient physicians, including Hippocrates. A randomized double-blind cross-over design was used for this meta-life qualitative analysis.

Results: All of the interviewees agreed that the theory of humours is an accurate model to explain disease and personality.

Interpretation: Hiring a psychic to conduct after-death interviews with key informants is a useful way to validate scientific theories.



Methods

We used the meta-life qualitative analysis technique to validate Hippocrates' theory of humours. We blindfolded a blind peer-reviewed psychic with an academic appointment in pathology. This double-blind technique was used to transcend rationalism's bias of objectivity. To validate the humours theory, the psychic was asked to contact 3 other eminent ancient physicians: Galen of Pergamum, Marcellus Empiricus of Bordeaux and Paracelsus of Salzburg.

The psychic used various induction methods to interview the chosen dead, including a method developed by Dr. Caelius Aurelianus, a 5th-century Numidian, that relies on the power of the word *Abracadabra*, the more popular but irrational and nonsuperstitious approach that uses herbs (as described in scores of early manuscripts) and finally the more disgusting technique of using "drugs from animals" to induce the psychic state.

The 4 interviews, each lasting about 45 minutes, were conducted in a cubicle free of clutter in the basement of a university hospital pathology department. The induction methods used by the psychic were chosen at random by a family practice resident on elective rotation in pathology.

Hugh Malcolm

*The colour of the humours,
where there is no ebb
of them, is like that of flowers.
— Hippocrates*

Once people die, retrospective studies are used to help determine the cause of the disease process that led to their demise. Only after death can the validity of scientific theories of disease and personality be tested free of life's biases.

Hippocrates, the father of Western medicine, devised his theory of the 4 humours — blood, phlegm, black bile and yellow bile — in the 4th century BC as a means of determining a person's health and disposition. Subsequent physicians have used his model to evolve an archetype of personality. In the 24 centuries since Hippocrates, scientific medicine has evolved into a complex body of confusing and sometimes contradictory facts. What medicine lacks — and alternative or complementary medicine offers — is a unified theory of Nature. We saw the need to devise a unified theory of medicine.

Results

The first physician interviewed was Hippocrates, who gave clinical examples of his theory of humours.

Second, the psychic contacted Galen of Pergamum, the Roman gladiator-physician of the 1st century AD. Galen corroborated Hippocrates' ideas about humours on the basis of his primary research and extensive publications in pathology.

For the third interview the psychic tried to contact Marcellus Empiricus but found significant interference from other Marcelli, including Marcellus of Side, who resented the interruption.

The fourth physician contacted was Paracelsus of Salzburg, the 16th-century German physician. He said that "nobody would deny the existence of the 4 elementary humours," but he argued that they do not play the part attributed to them by the Galenic school. Paracelsus expanded on the work of Hippocrates and said that "every organ has 3 principles" — sulfur, mercury and salt. He added that the vital principle keeping the organism alive is called "archeus," the vital principle.

Interpretation

Holding after-death interviews with key informants is a useful technique of validating scientific theories. In our study, all of the physicians interviewed stated that the theory of humours is an accurate model to explain disease and disposition.

There are limitations with this method of meta-life qualitative analysis. The psychic admitted that establishing interpersonal relationships with the dead has its difficulties. The linguistic technique *Abbracadabra* is ele-

gant in its simplicity and was found by our psychic to be the most reliable. The "drugs from animals" technique is too time-consuming, and often the substances are difficult to obtain because animals are loathe to give them up without a fight. The use of herbs, albeit more modern, is subject to external pressure from the herbal manufacturing industry.

Other barriers to meta-life qualitative analysis identified by the psychic and the family medicine resident were the following:

- It is difficult to schedule appointments with the dead.
- The observer-participants may be afraid to talk to dead people.
- The academic community may be unaware of the after-death contact program.
- Negative comments and behaviour (e.g., snickering) by senior staff may deter medical students and residents from participating.¹

In keeping with a philosophy of continuous quality improvement, faculties of medicine should consider instituting a program to enlighten faculty members of the benefits of meta-life qualitative analysis. The addition of psychics to medical faculty could facilitate better communication with the dead.

Reference

1. Capon IL, Dictum PS, Fleece JK. Conjuring the dead. *Stud Higher Educ* 1998;16(2):666.

**Drs. Secretion, Conjur and Attitude are
Co-Directors of the ACME After-Death Contact
Program. As such, there is a direct conflict of
interest with their promotion of psychic assistance.**

GENERALISTS — Doctors who treat what they assume you have, as opposed to specialists, who assume you have what they treat. No longer as generalist as they used to be.

— From *A Sceptic's Medical Dictionary* by Michael O'Donnell, BMJ Publishing Group, London (available through the CMA Member Service Centre, 888 855-2555).