

# Role of General Practitioners (Medical Doctors) in Promoting Whole-Person Health: Bridging Conventional and Complementary Medicine in Fiji and the Pacific

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## ABSTRACT

General practitioners (GPs) are a major component of the health systems in Fiji and the Pacific region, for instance, is devoid of complete health systems. More and more, however, GPs are moving towards a health model that is psychocentric, encompassing both alternative and conventional medicine. This approach appreciates the relationship between an individual's physical, mental, and spiritual well-being and is, therefore, in line with both traditional and contemporary health care systems. Amid the growing incidences of chronic conditions and mental illnesses, GPs within these regions have started appreciating how, Sudarshan Kriya, an age-old breathing exercise popularized by Shree Ravi Shankar chakras-based healing techniques, has a role in overall health care. Therefore, this paper notes how GPs in Fiji and the Pacific are integrating modern medicine and complementary medicine and does this by using the evidence and practices available globally in the interest of whole person health.

## The Concept of Whole Person Health

'Whole person health' is a practice that ensures that any form of health care takes cognizance of all health's components including physical, emotional psychological, and spiritual health. This is quite different from the conventional medical practice which most of the times aims at treating diseases and alleviating the symptoms. WHO denotes the importance of whole-person health especially in optimizing health in health system which is sustainability in particular (pg. 20, 2020)? In the case of GPs in the Pacific context, such way of provision of services is very important due to the geographical health barriers and diverse cultures of the people.

## Chronic Disease Burden in Fiji and the Pacific

Non-communicable diseases (NCDs), such as diabetes, hypertension, and cardiovascular diseases, are prevalent in the Pacific Islands. NCDs are responsible for 84% of mortality in Fiji, making them the most common cause of death (Pacific Community [1]). This statistic calls for strategies focused on disease prevention or management that extend beyond treatment as usual. For GPs, motivation to modify risk factors including nutrition, exercise, and stress management is key when aiming to prevent the occurrence of NCDs. In this aspect, the role of complementary medicine, especially the practices centered on mindfulness, becomes significant.

## Combining Traditional Western Medicine and Complementary Medicine

The term western medicine is often associated with the pharmaceutical and surgical interventions within an evidence-based practice approach. Complementary medicine on the other hand contains practices that are not considered as mainstream, for example, yoga, meditation, and the use of herbal medicine. Where a merger of such systems is done, health outcomes tend to be better as noted by the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health that revealed the application of both medicine reduces the risk of symptoms of chronic illnesses such as arthritis or anxiety and high blood pressure (NCCIH, 2021). In such allopathic settings, this type of appreciation of traditional medicine, especially among the indigenous people of Fiji, helps GPs in integrating traditional medicine with complementary medicine in practice. As in many Pacific nations, where cultural issues are central to health and healing, GPs' positive attitude towards their patients' use of complementary medicine enhances patient compliance and promotes the importance of integrated care (Tsey, et al. [2]).

## Mental Health and the Importance of Stress Reduction

In the Pacific region, mental health challenges are increasing mostly due to many sociocultural and economic factors, climate change, and sociocultural changes. It is predicted that at least a mental health problem would affect one out of four people in Fiji (Fiji Ministry of Health, 2022). Because of how stress tends to compound the problem of mental issues, it becomes necessary to learn ways of relieving it for the sake of good health. In this case practices such as Sudarshan Kriya – designed by Shree Ravi Shankar – who believes the technique is useful for stress relief and for improving mental focus, can be of great help. Research has been conducted worldwide to determine the effectiveness of Sudarshan Kriya in overcoming anxiety, depression and stress-related disorders. According to a study published in the Journal of Clinical Psychiatry in 2019, participants who practiced Sudarshan Kriya had relatively lower cortisol levels after the practice than their counterparts who did not practice the technique. (Brown, et al. [3]). Additionally, the techniques emphasize breath retraining and mindfulness which corresponds to the entire person health model; hence GPs can use them with regards to patients' mental health concerns.

## Implementing Sudarshan Kriya in GP Practices

The introduction of Sudarshan Kriya into primary care practice in Fiji and throughout the Pacific would not only enhance treatments offered but also aid patients in managing stress through non-pharmacological methods. General Practitioners (GPs) could conduct a few short sessions on the technique or refer the patients to those already certified in teaching Sudarshan Kriya, thereby presenting a rationale for the use of both the traditional and the alternative methods of treatment. This technique may be beneficial especially to those individuals who suffer from chronic pain or psychological conditions made

worse by the stress. In addition, the use of Sudarshan Kriya in health care services will also support the WHO's aim of incorporating mental health services into primary health care services hence extending mental health care services to the wider population (WHO [4]).

## Education and Training

In order to effectively integrate the conventional with a more naturalistic approach, it is vital for general practitioners (GPs) in Fiji and the Pacific to undergo training in the entire health of patients. It is important to include modules on the use of complementary therapies and other techniques like Sadhana Kriya in their training first before they become doctors so that such doctors are prepared to provide comprehensive care. In a research article which was published in the Journal of Integrative Medicine, it was demonstrated that medical practitioners who attended courses on complementary medicine, performed better in the management of chronic diseases and stress issues (Smith, et al. [5]). For GPs based in the Pacific, continuing professional development courses with a component of alternative medicine will help further extend their ability to promote whole person care.

## Building Patient-Centered Healthcare Models

Whole-person health incorporates a model of health care delivery in which patients are considered active participants in their own process of healing. This model is consistent with the general cultural ethos of the Pacific Islands where health is often regarded at a broader level than the individual. When GPs appreciate the preferences of the patients and include them in deciding the treatment course, stronger bonds between the doctor and the patient are created and health outcomes improved. In practice, this could translate to the provision of both alternative and modern approaches, for instance, administering Sudarshan Kriya for stress management in addition to prescribing medication. Adherence to treatment and participation in preventive initiatives is more common among patients whose cultural and individual needs are recognized and incorporated into the practice.

## Community Engagement and Education

Another way GPs may help achieve whole-person health goals is through community engagement and advocacy for the complementary practices. Thus, there may be community education programs about teaching how to perform Sudarshan Kriya and other forms of exercises which may help individuals control their health. Studies show that health programs in over US prisons resulted in patients being more willing to seek preventative care longer after (WHO [4]). Moreover, in the Pacific where people value collectivism more than individualism, GPs' involvement in community outreach may help sensitize people to the use of complementary medicine and also complete the government's health care objectives.

## Challenges and Future Directions

There are obstacles, however, in the use of whole-person health or complementary medicine in general practice. There is still a dearth of convincing evidence support for the inclusion of practices such as Sudarshan Kriya into healthcare for the most part. Additionally, resource constraints such as a shortage of skilled personnel as well as lack of adequate funding for health promotion activities hinder the Pacific Islands. These challenges can only be overcome by a concerted effort from the government, health care systems as well as the communities which will make whole person health an important focus. In the future, however, whole person health care has the capacity to change the way healthcare services are delivered in Fiji and the Pacific. General practice has the unique opportunity to enhance the care of populations by integrating both conventional and complementary medicine that meet the specific characteristics of the population. This model takes care of not only physical health but also mental and spiritual health which goes hand in hand with cultural health practices and results in a better and health-centered society.

## Conclusion

General practitioners in Fiji and Pacific Islands have a higher potential of encouraging the practice of whole person's health by in-

corporation of both modern and traditional medicine. For instance, conducting Sudarshan Kriya is a great means of stress management which fits the indigenous people of the Pacific perfectly. With training, awareness and focus on promotion of care to patients which are the GPs objectives, GPs can reconcile medical model in future when health will be all inclusive of the body, mind, and spirit.

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