

# Wonderful World of Integrative, Patient-Centered Care

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Wouldn't it be wonderful if health care professionals could provide patients with choices about how they live their lives while also protecting them from chronic diseases? That certainly would be a dream scenario for many humanistic doctors.

Fortunately, we may be closer to realizing this goal than we think. During the last 50 years, the health care industry has evolved, so individual providers are much better equipped to work with a range of collaborative resources and tools designed to help patients achieve their desired health outcomes without having to sacrifice their normal ways of life.

The biggest development in this evolution was the birth of integrated health care – a system that places the patient front and center in the medical process and allows for comprehensive, holistic, effective treatment.

## What Is Integrated Health Care?

Integrated (or interdisciplinary) health care refers to a system in which medical professionals from the two main health care arenas - behavioral (mental) health care and primary (physical) care – collaborate and communicate extensively.

This system is unique, because information is shared across multiple disciplines among health care professionals, so a patient's needs are met comprehensively. A given integrated health care team might include physicians, nurse practitioners, psychologists, dietitians, personal trainers and physical therapists, depending on the individual case.

Conventionally, these health care spheres

tend to operate independently of one another, increasing the likelihood that a patient might only be treated for certain aspects of their condition but not all of them. For example, a victim of a car accident might have a great physical therapist but never even realize they need a psychologist to deal with the trauma-related post-traumatic stress disorder.

Furthermore, the inconvenience of seeking out specialists from completely separate health care organizations can be mentally and financially taxing.

Right here in North Carolina, there are several high-end, state-of-the-art facilities that subscribe to the “integrative” method. In these locations, medical professionals create strategies, personalized to each patient, based on the individual's unique conditions, needs and circumstances.

The benefits of this approach are manifold: Not only are patients, caregivers and providers put in a better position to succeed, but the larger health care system is buoyed as well. For example, studies show that the integrated health care approach can improve a society's access to services, improve the general quality of care and lower health care costs overall.

## How Can Providers Optimize Patient Care?

Given the availability of these resources and methods, it remains to be seen how they will be adapted and cultivated by existing health care professionals.

I believe the first priority for achieving the goal of a fully integrated health care



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system should be to connect all patients to their own personal-care teams. This means that each patient would work with a central provider, who would act as the leader of a group of specialists - across all disciplines - dedicated to the individual's various health care needs.

Achieving such a lofty goal won't be easy. Each new idea needs to pass through a process called the “diffusion of innovation.” The convoluted process begins with the original, innovative idea, which then must trickle through a series of communication channels over a long period of time, receiving pushback from the more rigid denizens of the older, outdated system, gradually taking hold and hopefully, eventually, reshaping the broader social system.

However, this is an endeavor worth striving toward, as it will ensure strong relationships between the patient, the provider and the patient care team, improving everyone's lives. And what a wonderful world this would be.