A n interesting example of the changing practice of medicine in America was played out recently during a meeting of the King County Council in Washington State. At the meeting, held to discuss the potential development of a natural medicine clinic at the county hospital, a member of the Seattle medical community asked how the Council could even consider supporting such an "unscientific" form of healthcare. To allow this form of healthcare delivery into a teaching hospital environment would be tantamount to endorsement, according to this physician, and "Every doctor knows there is nothing to natural medicine but 'old wives' tales."  

Discussion at this meeting focused in part on the differences between the natural medicine and conventional drug approaches to treatment of prostate disorders, including prostate cancer. Proponents of the natural medicine clinic stated that scientific studies and clinical evidence indicate that natural medicine may be the most effective way to treat benign prostatic hypertrophy and even to prevent prostate cancer. The conventional medicine spokesman insisted this allegation was incorrect and maintained that the new prostate medications are the only proven way to treat prostatic hypertrophy.

At an earlier Council meeting, several representatives of the natural medicine community had presented evidence indicating that dietary alteration may be the most important tool to prevent prostate disorders and prostate cancer. Years ago, a strong correlation was found between increased dietary intake of red-orange fruits and vegetables rich in carotenes and decreased incidence of prostate cancer. Carotenes are partially converted in the body to vitamin A, and researchers found that vitamin A intake was also inversely correlated to prostate cancer incidence. The conversion of carotenes to vitamin A in the body requires the essential mineral zinc, which is important for a number of biochemical functions upon which prostate health depends. These are only a few examples of the research indicating a link between diet and prostate problems.

Recent research has also established that dietary fat may play a role in the risk of prostate disease. The problem seems to be not only too much dietary fat, but also the wrong kind. Inadequate intake of the essential polyunsaturated fats from fish and certain unrefined vegetable oils is associated with increased prostate cancer risk.

All these studies demonstrate the importance of diet in the prevention and possible treatment of prostate problems. In the United States, the incidence of prostate problems is much higher among black men than white. Evidence suggests that this difference is not simply because of genetic differences, but also diet and lifestyle habits. Prostate problems are much less common in Japan than in the Western world, even among older men. This difference may be the result, in part, of differences in diet, especially the high intake of soy foods in the traditional Japanese diet. Soy products contain natural hormones that modulate the detoxification of testosterone. These soy substances, or isoflavones, include genistein and daidzein. When consumed in adequate quantities, these isoflavones help prevent enlargement of, and cancer-producing changes in, the prostate. They do so by helping prevent the formation of a toxic form of testosterone. Some medical scientists, including Herman Adlercreutz, MD, at the University of Helsinki School of Medicine in Finland, have recommended that men at risk of prostate problems consume soy-based products on a daily basis.

Other natural agents may also block the formation of the toxic form of testosterone. One that has been extensively studied is the saw palmetto, a plant that grows in the southeastern United States. Taken orally, extract of the saw palmetto berry has been shown to reduce swelling of the prostate.

Based on this research and on clinical experience, practitioners of natural medicine have placed their patients on a low-fat diet that includes two or more daily portions of soy products such as tofu, miso, soy milk, or soy flour or protein that has not been commercially treated to remove the isoflavones. Natural medicine practitioners also use supplements of essential fatty acids including fish oil, primrose oil, and flaxseed oil to help balance the essential fats. Supplements of selenium, zinc, carotene, vitamin A, and vitamin B₆ may...
be administered concurrently with saw palmetto berry extract.12

Using this approach, practitioners of natural medicine have provided their patients with significant help in managing prostate problems without the adverse side effects and limited success typical of the drug approach to this problem. Furthermore, the natural medicine program is much less costly than the drug approach.

At the Council hearing, the conventional medicine advocate stated that because the effectiveness of the natural medicine approach to prostate management was not clinically proven, it was unacceptable. At this point in the discussion, an amazing thing happened. A venerable and respected member of the Council rose and took the microphone. He said that at the initial discussion of the proposed natural medicine clinic he had been impressed by the presentation by those who spoke on behalf of natural medicine. He was intrigued by the discussion of the natural medicine approach to treating prostate problems because he himself had experienced this difficulty for more than 5 years. His enlarged prostate had necessitated his getting up several times in the night to use the bathroom and had disrupted his sleep. He had taken prostate medications recommended by his doctor without success. The side effects of these medications, he felt, were as bad as the prostate problem itself. After the Council meeting at which the natural medicine approach to the treatment of prostate problems was first discussed, he had purchased the recommended nutrients at a health food store and had begun to follow the suggested diet plan.

He said he believed that the concerns about natural medicine raised by the representative of the conventional medical community took his seat, and the Council went on to vote in favor of establishing a natural medicine clinic in the county hospital in Seattle by January 1996. The natural medicine treatment of prostate problems played a prominent role in the outcome of this discussion, and it represents an interesting example of the changing complexion of medicine in the United States.

References