**The Heavenly Messengers medical guide to illness  
William M. Buchholz, MD**

At some time all of us will become ill. It may be very uncomfortable like the flu or dangerous like cancer or a heart attack. The following guide may help you find the care you need and look at what it means to be very ill. The first section examines your relationship with the doctors and the medical system.  
  
**WORKING WITH DOCTORS AND THE MEDICAL SYSTEM**

Examine your beliefs about the medical system and doctors. Are they based on what is real or are they wishful thinking? Medicine has changed considerably since Marcus Welby, MD was on TV. You can prevent many disappointments by recognizing that the current system needs considerable fixing and many doctors need to have more time for each patient. This is changing but that may not meet your needs right now.

Several tips to get better service.

* The most important person in a doctor’s office is the (overworked) person who answers the phone. Be nice to them, they really are trying to help you. (Be nice to the nurse/lab tech/doctor, too: they’re also trying to help.)   
  Become a partner in your health care. Doctors can read faster than they can listen. If you have several issues you need to address, write them down, put the most important ones at the top, and send them to the doctor before the visit (email, fax) if you can.
* Pay attention to your illness or symptom and take notes on your BP (if that’s a problem) or symptom (when, where, what makes it better or worse, what have you done about it). Useful data helps doctors diagnose and treat you better. If you realize the problem is worry (is this a dangerous thing?) let them know what your concern is.
* If you need open heart surgery don’t go to an herbalist. This isn’t to discourage using integrative therapies including acupuncture, homeopathy, naturopathy, etc. If you need a highly trained technical doctor, find one. She or he may not have the most comforting bedside manor. What you want, however, are really good hands.
* Many illnesses are best treated with a team approach. This often includes different specialties with different jobs. When you need emotional support it may come from different members of that team.
* Get more information about your health from reputable sources. The internet is filled with unreliable stuff. Some popular websites like WebMD and even Medscape seem to cover more political and social medical information or are too technical for many non-trained readers. Here are some excellent sources:
  + Health Librarians and libraries are available at El Camino hospital, Stanford and some Kaiser hospitals.
  + Planetree ([http://planetree.org/contact-us/](http://planetree.org/contact-us/ %20) ) is a well established resource for patient centered medicine information. They have local branches in Cupertino ([www.sccl.org/services/planetree](https://www.sccl.org/services/planetree)), San Jose, Los Gatos
  + <http://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/news/e-newsletters/>
  + <http://www.health.harvard.edu/newsletters>
  + <http://www.mayoclinic.org/medical-professionals/sign-up-email-newsletter>

**ABOUT SERIOUS ILLNESS**

Though illnesses vary there are some common experiences.

* Anxiety about its cause, treatment and outcome. Will my cancer be cured?
* Existential worry: why me, did I do something wrong?
* Inconvenience because usual routines are interrupted. I’m in bed and can’t go to work.
* Dependency on others for care and help. “Can somebody help me to the bathroom?!”
* Loss of control: My body doesn’t work the way it should, I can’t breathe right.
* Confronting uncertainty: Waiting for the X-ray to show the fracture is healed.

Those issues are present in any illness or injury. Think about the last time you were sick and examine the list. For each issue, what were you attached to?

Serious diseases generally bring up the question “Am I going to die?” That may not be true for your situation but that doesn’t keep your brain from going there. Fear is different from danger but both need to be addressed. Dealing with the messenger of illness may prepare you to deal ultimately with the messenger of death.

My patient once said that she didn’t want to waste a perfectly good cancer. She showed me how confronting mindfully even a potentially mortal disease can be a valuable experience. Ultimately she did die, though it was 32 years later and it was from a heart attack. She wasn’t my patient then but I imagine she used that experience well, too.

Another patient commented that he knew what a hero was. A hero is someone who is afraid but goes ahead and does it anyway. Dealing with any illness is difficult. Some diseases are harder than others and some persons seem to handle them easier than others. For all of us, however, we need to discover what allows us to become some kind of hero and cultivate, practice and use those skills when we next need them.  
  
**GETTING WHAT YOU NEED**

Mick Jagger once sang, “You can't always get what you want, but if you try sometime you find you get what you need” Wanting and needing are different. How do you know what you really need? This question applies to being sick as it does to many other situations. The most straight forward answer is to get well. When most medical problems were infectious diseases that answer was satisfactory. Now, most illnesses are chronic. We talk of control of diabetes, remission from cancer, management of chronic pain. Even weight loss does not cure obesity since regardless of treatment people regain weight (from many different causes that may be out of their control).

If you have a chronic illness and you can’t expect cure, what do you need? The answer to this is individual but generally is the ability to cope, to accept a New Normal, and to get on living a life that is satisfactory. The messengers shake us up by showing us the unavoidable reality of how our bodies can lead to Dukkha. How we respond to their message determines the rest of our suffering. Listen carefully.