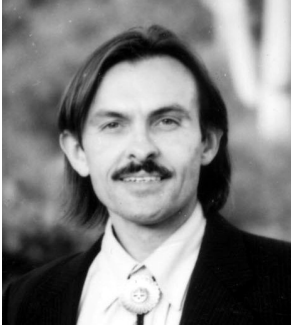


SIX QUESTIONS WITH DR. LEWIS MEHL-MADRONA



Call him Coyote. Call him a shaman. Call him the sweat-lodge doc. Call him anything but conventional. Five years removed from his position as director of the UPMC Center for Complementary Medicine at Shadyside Hospital, Lewis Mehl-Madrona, MD continues his quest to revision medicine by integrating modern science with ancient Native American healing. Mehl-Madrona is a Stanford-educated, board-certified family physician, psychiatrist and geriatrician. He is also part Cherokee and has studied native traditions for 25 years. Currently working as Coordinator of Integrative Psychiatry and Systems Medicine for the University of Arizona's Program in Integrative Medicine, Mehl-Madrona has written the best-selling books *Coyote Medicine*, *Coyote Healing* (penned while in Pittsburgh) and *Coyote Wisdom*.

You weren't able to speak on the record in 2000 about reasons for your departure from UPMC. Any thoughts looking back? It's unfortunate—we were constructing what could have been the world's most imminent complementary medicine practice. We were attracting incredibly high quality people, getting research grants, turning out research, doing extraordinary clinical care. We were treating the most difficult, mysteriously chronic patients and providing a real service to the medical staff because they didn't know what to do with those patients. So we were doing something.

What's the greatest challenge of working in U.S. health care today? I see a push for doctors to have shorter office visits and do less for patients in those visits. Why? Medicine is collapsing under the weight of health care financing. The only way for a physician to make a decent living is to do procedures on patients, and lots of them. In certain specialties, doctors aren't doing well. I recently determined that I could make more money as a truck driver than a geriatrician.

What needs to occur to improve the system? We need to move toward a guaranteed, single-payer health care system similar to Canada and Europe. Also, doctor pay should be outcome based. If doctors were held accountable for outcomes and had the ability to make more money based on them, they'd find ways to create better outcomes. That would transform medicine overnight.

Towards the end of your tenure here, you were maligned for your practice of "sweat lodges." What was that about? A sweat is a ceremony in the Native tradition. It's singing and praying together in the dark and the heat for the purpose of purification and, ultimately, healing. The whole sweat lodge thing, which I did on private time, was brought to UPMC's attention through the media. They sensationalized it, made it seem more dramatic than it was, and didn't view Native American as a bona fide religion.

What are your fondest memories of Pittsburgh? City lights exploding through the Fort Pitt Tunnels; memorable patients; and people who attended the lodges. In a sweat, it's customary to share stories and favorite songs. Funny thing in Pittsburgh, we'd always end up singing these great Hebrew songs. How remarkable: a Jewish-Indian sweat lodge. Those songs are still etched on my brain.

Do you think allopathic and alternative medicine will ever truly become "integrative" medicine? It may not be probable, but it's possible. It would mean moving beyond the biomedical paradigm of genetic determinism, which says "it's either curable or not; and if we can't find a drug to fix it, by definition it's not fixable." It would mean putting the spiritual on par with the technological. It would mean recognizing that healing is always possible even though curing is less controllable. It would mean believing in the power of intent. For example, I'm now doing experiments on the effects of ceremonial prayer on brainwaves; preliminary findings show that your brain knows when it's being prayed for, even if you don't . . . But these are ideas on the fringe. Doctors like me, we are the deviants of the culture, the ones who won't lie down and take their [anti-psychotic drug] Risperdal.

-- Gina Mazza Hillier