

Why This Finnish Doctor Believes in Herbs

by Marjo Valonen, MD

From an early age, I had a great interest in medicine. When I was young, I thought I wanted to be a brain surgeon. Later, in medical school at the University of Turku, Finland, *everything* interested me. I was also lucky enough to study a course on acupuncture, something that is not normally taught in Finnish medical schools.

After obtaining my medical license, I first went to work as a surgeon. However, I soon realized that I wanted to pursue other areas of medicine as well. I wanted to consider and treat the whole human being, not just a part of that whole.

My Own Illness

Later, after giving birth to twins and to a daughter soon thereafter, I fell seriously ill following a difficult childbirth. I was bedridden, and nobody could figure out what was wrong with me. I asked many colleagues for their counsel and submitted to various tests. The conclusion was always the same: “No, nothing is wrong with you.”

My symptoms included extreme fatigue, so that even keeping my eyes open felt like too much work. Any physical activity was followed by a worsening of symptoms. My husband caught me two times after I fainted trying to get to the bathroom by myself. Confined to my bed, I relied on my husband for everything. He brought me my food, carried me to the bathroom, took care of our three small children, and maintained his own work outside the home. He is the real hero of this story!

However, when doctors couldn't find anything wrong with my lab tests, they told me that I was just imagining it all, that it was all in my head, and that I was causing myself to be ill. One colleague even said to me, “You're just lazy; you don't want to work.”

The Search for a Cure

The worst of it lasted for two years or so. After all that, I was able to sit and walk a bit. I was fairly functional, but I couldn't do much. I realized there were still pieces missing in my health puzzle, so I started searching for answers in books and on the internet, reading everything I could find. That's how I began learning more about functional and integrative medicine. I did everything I could think of: I healed my gut, I found my food intolerances, measured and corrected deficiencies, addressed hormonal issues, worked with stress management, started detox, and so on. My ability to function was better but still only halfway there. That's when I ran into the chronic infections. I ran various tests on myself and confirmed having Lyme disease, discovering that I had other active infections as well. Those discoveries started me on the next step of my journey back to health: to find out how to treat those infections.

Initially, I was told that I had to treat them with antibiotics. From previous experience I knew that they would wreak havoc on my gut – but I decided to go with them since that was the conventional procedure. ILADS is doing great work regarding *Borrelia*, and I tried the combination of antibiotics they encourage; but – as I had feared – my gut could handle the treatment only for so long. In a case like mine, where the illness has had a long time to establish itself, a short course has a limited effect. At the same time, there were patients desperately seeking help and I went with the knowledge I had. I was working on a part-time basis looking for the next pieces of the puzzle.

The Cowden Support Program

So, I started looking at herbal solutions, trying different protocols. But none of them worked very well for

me. Then I heard from my colleague Dr. Armin Schwarzbach in Germany about the support program developed by Dr. Lee Cowden, using Nutramedix products. I contacted them and gave the program a try. Within a few months I had real progress, gaining more functionality, and with my lab results also showing a positive impact.

Sharing My Own Healing with Others

I was able to do more and see more patients. As I encountered people who had the same problems that I had, I started using the Cowden Support Program with these patients. We're still amazed at how well it works; we have validated results in terms of patients' subjective scoring and laboratory analyses. We also apply integrative approaches to help patients in other ways.

Typically, many chronic patients don't have many positive test results at baseline. This often leads to a conclusion that the patient is not suffering from an infection. I was working with a university research group at that time, and we found that controls for a chronic dying patient also came back negative, proving that the immune system was not able to create antibodies. The idea of the Cowden Support Program is to get the immune system working again, while helping it fight infections. This is why I like the Elispot test we have available in Europe. It doesn't just measure whether you have antibodies: it also indicates how well your immune system is fighting. Many patients are so sick when they first come to my office that their immune system is almost shut down and can't fight effectively. So, if you only look at lab results in the beginning of treatment, then you might arrive at a false negative. As treatment progresses, the immune system becomes stronger; and the test results turn positive,

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until turning back to negative at the end of the treatment.

With all our patients, we compare their lab results with their symptoms. Pain and fatigue are typically the worst part of being ill. We do this at the beginning of treatment, and we then follow their self-assessments. Sometimes, both objective lab results and self-assessments improve at more or less the same rate. When that happens, we're happy. One or the other isn't enough. If the lab results are great, but the patient is fatigued and in pain, then you need to continue. You are not treating lab tests; you are treating the patient.

Cure or Remission?

Can Lyme disease and other infections be fully cured? Or, must we be content with tolerable remission of active symptoms? These are good questions. I think that we can get our patients cured in such a way that Lyme or its co-infections don't affect their life anymore because their immune system is in charge. We *all* carry *all sorts* of microbes and parasites and viruses within us *at all times*. In the infectious disease study, we saw that chronic people could have ten or more infections. That's life. The question is, "Who is in charge: you, or the microbes within you?"

I would agree with the assessment of the American cardiologist Dr. Thomas Levy: namely, that *Borrelia* is normally a commensal bug, requiring an already compromised autonomic nervous system to become infectious. I contracted Lyme already in the womb, from my mother. And, I carried it within me throughout my early years without noticing it. I became seriously ill only after the twin pregnancy and the birth of my daughter, during which I had many complications, when my immune system took a hard hit. And, that's when "the enemies" got the upper hand, moving from the merely incubational state to the acute one.

I am convinced that my role as a doctor is fundamentally to support my patients' immune systems. Only then can these microbes be defeated. Sometimes my patients express their concerns about ticks being everywhere. I remind them at those times that we can't live in a bubble.

Some have famously tried it, but it isn't a very good solution. We neither can nor should stop our children from running and playing in the woods. The best thing is to take care of our own body and immune system, so that we are strong enough to resist all of this.

This leads to the whole idea of preventative wellness, where medicine is seen not so much as treating diseases as helping and strengthening people, and in such a way that they do not become ill in the first place. That's one of the reasons why I think Dr. Cowden's program is so effective, because the use of antimicrobial herbs is constantly changing, affecting different kinds of microbes – not just *Borrelia*, but also the co-infectors. The antimicrobial herbs are complemented by detoxifying and anti-inflammatory ones, as well as herbs that support energy production. Some people think it's enough to take antibiotics, or even antimicrobial herbs. But, that's just killing pathogens. I advocate a much wider approach, one that supports the whole system. Uprooting is not enough. You also have to replant.

What Happens After Symptoms Disappear?

All our patients receive an ongoing maintenance program from us, some for the rest of their lives. By the time that they are fully functional again, we've known them for several months or, in the harder cases, several years. We usually have acquired a good idea of their genetic composition and their ability to withstand these things on their own. So, someone who has a good, robust constitution may need only a basic multi-vitamin and some detox and supporting herbs. On the other hand, a very fragile person might need other things to support them. I myself am a person who genetically has lots of problems with my immune and detox systems, but I'm doing fine with herbs. I continue taking products like Samento and Takuna every day, morning and evening, and I'll never give them up! By taking care of myself, I'm able to live a normal life. My mission, the reason why I'm talking about herbs, is to teach other professionals how to help others in the same way, so that more and more people can benefit. I've been invited to speak about my experiences in ten countries in the last couple of years. People are interested.

I believe we're living already the future of medicine. It's so great that we have researchers like Professor Eva Sapi, of the University of New Haven, moving on to in vivo research. So, we're getting more information on how herbs work. Of course, there are always those people who think that herbs can't possibly be that effective. They need to be reminded that the Nobel Prize for Medicine was given in 2015 to Professor Youyou Tu, a pharmacologist at the China Academy of Chinese Medical Sciences in Beijing, in recognition of her work with the herb *Artemisia annua*. Also, many conventional medicines are developed from natural substances, including herbs. Since you can't patent something derived from nature, the medical companies have to change or break these substances in order to obtain patents.

Concluding Thoughts

Returning to the question of antibiotics, I think we're using too much of them, which leads to the loss of their efficacy. Bacterial resistance has become a big problem. It is much more difficult for bacteria to develop resistance to an herb, which may have tens or even hundreds of different substances with which it fights bacteria. It's quite easy for a bacterium to develop resistance to an antibiotic since it is just this one thing against which it has to fight. But when you send tens or hundreds of things against that bacterium, it has a much harder time developing effective resistance. We haven't even touched situations with heavy viral loads.

Of course, I don't think it's wrong to use antibiotics in serious situations, like acute pneumonia. The real problem is that we are using them to treat very minor conditions. We're also giving them to our livestock, which results in indirect antibiotic exposure for us. These are the real problems, not acute treatments. What was designed to help us is really hurting us.

So, I think herbs are the way of the future. ◆

Marjo Valonen, MD, has been medical director of Astris Medical Center (Helsinki, Finland), a clinic that specializes in tick-borne and other chronic infectious illnesses, since 2014. In addition to patient care, Dr. Valonen has presented workshops and spoken at Lyme-focused conferences throughout Europe. She is also a member of the University of Jyväskylä Lyme and co-infections research team.