



Living Longer, Living Better – Exploring the Heart-Mind Connection

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Professor Lionel H. Opie has produced a work of genius in the form of this, his latest book. “Living Longer, Living Better – Exploring the Heart-Mind Connection” truly deserves the iconic status which two of his other books, “Drugs for the Heart”, 7th Edition (co-edited with Bernard J. Gersh) and “Heart Physiology: From Cell to Circulation”, 4th Edition, have achieved. I cannot help but fully agree with Professor Timothy Noakes’ comment in his foreword to the book, “I know of no one who understands the heart more completely or who can express himself with greater effect to any audience than can Lionel”.

Further praise is highlighted by Professor Stefan Neubauer, professor of Cardiovascular Medicine, University of Oxford, in his foreword: “...a book written by one of the greatest cardiologists of all times”. Professor Neubauer concludes: “Reading this book and digesting all its masterful wisdom is a must!” So there is the challenge which faces all of us.

“Living Longer, Living Better – Exploring the Heart-Mind Connection” has been written essentially for the lay public and herein lies Professor Opie’s genius; he succeeds masterfully in explaining very difficult concepts in a crystal clear manner with a unique turn of phrase which is often intriguing and charming. The “professional” involved in medical care, whether he or she is a nurse, family practitioner, physician, cardiologist, cardiothoracic surgeon or any other carer who provides recommendations on health matters, will all be equally enlightened by this publication.

The book is filled with numerous “Opiegrams” (my description) which are pertinent and clear, and the informative cartoons aid in grasping the many original and fascinating ideas which Professor Opie sets out to explain. The numerous tables are succinct, appropriate and lucid, invigorating the text and complementing the outstanding cartoons. Key references are included at the end of the book and these certainly justify further exploration and thought. A carefully thought out and detailed index (an aspect which is often neglected nowadays) is a joy to peruse and makes the book an excellent reference source.

The book is comprised of eight concise chapters which can be read individually in the exploration of certain facets of “Exploring the Heart-Mind Connection”, but which constitute a holistic approach to “Living Longer, Living Better”. Chapter 1, “In the Beginning”, describes the physiology of survival from the time of man’s appearance on earth and how the stresses introduced with the evolution of time have made these adaptive responses potentially dangerous to continuing good health. This chapter clarifies beautifully the crucial role of the autonomic nervous system, the renal control of regulating blood volume, the effects of running-induced dehydration, the adaptive response to the paucity of salt, the effects of blood loss, and the dangers of developing systemic hypertension.

Chapter 2, “Long-term Health”, concentrates on the development and pathology of atherosclerosis and hypertension with their deleterious sequelae. The concept of the ubiquitous, and ever-present factor of “stress”, and thus the state of the mind, is interwoven in a most charming and succinct manner.

Chapter 3, “Staying Healthy”, discusses the role of the major risk factors (the “big five”) and how these can be avoided, and their potentially lethal consequences minimised. The most useful, pragmatic and often under-appreciated, “Harvard risk factor charts” for both sexes are included and described in a simple way. It also addresses the contribution of the recently recognised and contentious aspect of “tissue inflammation”.

In Chapter 4, “Diets for Modern Living”, Professor Opie demystifies all the nonsense and quackery which abounds in this arena. Much of what he clarifies will not be to the liking of the annual multi-billion currency industry which is continuing to thrive by way of blatant misinformation and hoodwinking of the general public.

Chapter 5, “Fads vs. Facts”, is a natural extension of the previous chapter in that the various supplements are outlined and their effects on health highlighted. The vital understanding of the antioxidants is exquisitely portrayed in Opie’s inimitable manner. Again, as is his “trademark”, the author’s claims are supported by rigorous analysis of the published trials and other scientific data.

In Chapter 6, “Mind over Matter”, the interplay of the difficult concept of “mind” (a concept which has been debated by philosophers, psychologists, Jungian analysts and others for centuries) is explored with respect to its relationship to stress, blood pressure, heart attacks, cardiac rhythm and sudden death. Neurochemistry is exposed in a simplified yet detailed manner for all to understand.

I personally found Chapter 7, “Cognitive Function and Memory Loss”, to be the most challenging, outstanding, fascinating and awe inspiring chapter in the book. This chapter is co-written with Joseph Raimondo, a Rhodes Scholar presently doing research in neuroscience at Oxford University. Many of

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Opie's ideas in this chapter are original and prove to be an eye-opener and window into this great cardiologist's mind. Aerobic exercise-induced endorphin release, and its effect on stimulating cell growth in the hippocampus, a brain structure that mediates memory, is an example of such lateral thinking. Who can deny the fact that the study of the human brain, especially in relationship to memory and cellular regeneration, has now assumed centre stage in the world of research?

Naturally, this has been made feasible by ground-breaking developments in technology which is now applied to investigative equipment allowing for the direct visualisation of brain activity as opposed to the more simple aspect of brain structure. The interrelationship between "brain", "mind" and "cognition" are elucidated and this aspect is truly fascinating. Various interventions, whether diet related or drug induced, with the sole purpose of preserving both short-term and long-term memory are discussed in detail.

Chapter 8, the final chapter, entitled "The Heart-Mind Connection", explores the concept of "mindfulness". Methods of vagal stimulation, meditation (including transcendental), Yoga, religious faith and other forms of stress reduction are outlined. The concept of "passion" and "play" are introduced in a delightful manner with Opie introducing some novel and potentially beneficial thoughts. He is happiest enjoying a moderate amount of his favourite Pinot Noir. (As an aside, Professor Opie has published probably the definitive review of the beneficial effects of red wine in his article, "The Red Wine Hypothesis: from concepts to protective signalling molecules, in the *European Heart Journal*", 2007).

Perhaps one could offer a few suggestions to Professor Lionel Opie for consideration when he prepares the manuscript for his obligatory second edition of "Living Longer, Living Better – Exploring the Heart-Mind Connection". The potential benefit of aspirin in "primary prevention", particularly in respect of cardiovascular disease, is a topic which is broached very frequently. A clear elucidation of this aspect would be most helpful. Most recently, aspirin has been demonstrated to be therapeutic in some forms of cancer and this could be further explored.

Another topic which I believe is of crucial importance in improving our lot in life is the effect of music on the heart, brain, mind ("no brain, no mind" as Opie states) and soul. There are now numerous books devoted to "music therapy". A fascinating and most convincing recently published local book, "Music and Psyche – Contemporary Psychoanalytic Explorations", co-edited by Drs Paul W. Ashton and Dr Stephen Bloch, both Jungian analysts, is well-worth further exploration. There are also scientific journal publications, including music's beneficial role in the coronary care unit. This field warrants a chapter for inclusion in his future book.

"Living Longer, Living Better – Exploring the Heart-Mind Connection" is a critically important book and it deserves to be "made public" by way of all marketing strategies possible. The book, after all, is directed at the lay person and should be made available in locations frequented by such people. If supermarkets can stock John Platter's "South African Wines", then they can also do likewise with Lionel Opie's masterpiece. Oxford University Press, the publishers, should seriously consider making a paperback edition

available in South Africa to make the book more affordable. I have heard that such a format is presently marketed in India and is proving to be a phenomenal success.

The pharmaceutical industry, an organisation devoted to improving health, should seriously contemplate “sponsoring” this publication for the benefit of as many patients and citizens as is feasible. National organisations, such as the South African Medical Association, the South African Heart Association, and the Heart Foundation of South Africa should promote the book with great vigour. Perhaps Government, as well as the Medical Research Council, should highlight the preventative advice contained in this publication. After all, South Africa spends a fortune on the consequences of heart disease and vascular disease which is mainly preventable. No doubt, there are several other possibilities which can be explored and brought into fruition in ensuring the availability of this work of true genius to all who can read, understand and bring into practice a lifestyle which can only be beneficial to enjoying life and attaining longevity.

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