Integrative Medicine Matters from a Transplant Patient's Perspective

Louise Lerminiaux Wellness Consulting LRL

Hello Ladies and Gentlemen!

Thank you for the kind Denver welcome. I am extremely honoured to be part of this unique summit to discuss integrative wellness from a diverse range of perspectives whether it is from the clinician, patient, caregiver or investor point of view.

My current role is a Patient Advocate consultant. I met Tim Hobbs a month ago in Costa Rica at Dr. Randi Raymond's wellness center. As he described Emergent Wellness and Emergent Lives to me, I could hardly contain myself as this is exactly the type of integrated medicine concept I had been searching for. I will take the next 10 minutes or so to share my story and you will understand why.

I'm originally Canadian, grew on a small prairie Catholic farm below the poverty line. Life was not easy on the farm. My father was a verbally and physically abusive alcoholic. I have very vague memories of being sexually abused as a small child either by him or one of my brothers. I do remember having uncontrollable eczema, severe allergies and annual strep throat my entire childhood. At age 5, my appendix was removed. It was the first of many hospital stays and surgeries.

I was always described as the shy or stoic child. I had learned early on if I kept quiet and internalized all my emotions, I could avoid being yelled at or hit and survive the living hell I was in. Reflecting back on it now, no one thought to ask what the cause of my eczema, strep throat and appendix bursting may be. I have no doubt I would have been diagnosed with complex PTSD before I even started kindergarten.

At the age of 10, my mom had chronic kidney failure and needed dialysis. I remember being scared and wondering if she was going to die. Because we lived in a remote area, she had to take the bus into a city for dialysis, traveling 2-hours roundtrip, 3 times a week. With my 3 older siblings gone, I was forced into this adult caregiver role of both parents and my younger sister, even though I was just a child. Thankfully for the Canadian healthcare system my Mom was able to do dialysis for 10 years and then receive a kidney transplant in 1986, without us losing the farm.

I left the farm at 17 and never looked back, unbeknownst to me, more traumatic experiences lay ahead. In my first year of university, I was date raped but too afraid to report it because in the 80's that wasn't done. In my 2nd year of university, I was diagnosed with the same genetic kidney disease as my mom, polycystic kidney disease. There was very little information. I had no idea if I would live to get married, have children, or see retirement. I would probably need a dialysis machine to keep me alive, or I would die before I got old. At 19, I thought 50 was old…I turned 56 this year, so I guess I'm old?!

But I was still alive, and there was enough time to start my career and I went for it. I worked in several industries, mostly in technical leadership roles, often the only female. When I moved to the USA in 2002, I joined Thermo Fisher Scientific. Having seen the medical impacts and gaps with my own care and that of my family, I wanted to work side by side with scientists to try to make a difference.

Meanwhile I kept searching for answers. In my late 20's, I started going to Adult Children of Alcoholics meetings, and reading every book I could get my hands on about the impacts of living with an addict. I began talk therapy to help me understand how the environment I grew up in wasn't normal. I began to practice yoga and studied Buddhism because the Catholicism I was raised in didn't align with my values. I started running marathons because it was a form of meditation and a way to stay healthy; though some would argue it was a form of addiction.

Then the reality of dying hit me like a brick when I was added to the deceased donor organ registry. I had less than 15% kidney function at the age of 39. So, what does that feel like? I was exhausted and freezing cold 24/7. I couldn't run, climbing the stairs to my bedroom left me winded. My eyes and skin began to yellow, food, even water, tasted like metal. My head was in a constant fog. My past endurance racing helped me muster up strength to go to work because I needed the income and medical benefits, but I would collapse into bed when I got home and sleep all weekend. I was told to write my will. What? I'm 39 and need to write a will? I was also scared about the medical bills because the USA healthcare system is very different. I debated moving back to Canada, but I was so sick, I decided to stay in San Diego.

When I was down to 10% in 2008, I was asked if there was anyone who might consider giving their kidney to me as a living donor. My best friend Conna was the first to offer me her kidney and even though we were unrelated, we were a match. I will never forget that emotional phone call – it filled me with hope…and fear. You see, I've known Conna for over 33 years, and she always wanted to be a mom. She had had a premature baby Jake a few months earlier so I told her no. I couldn't live with myself if she had complications and couldn't be a mom to Jake. She assured me everything would be ok. She felt helpless when Jake was in intensive care unit for 1.5 months and this was her way to pay it forward.

It's still sometimes weird to think someone else' organ is inside of me keeping me alive. It remains to this day the most important lesson I learned in humility, and how giving and receiving graciously benefits both people. I'm lucky because I now have 2 birthdays. My "re-birthday" is Nov 5 when Conna saved my life with her kidney and later this year it will be 15 years. I still feel some tiny relief when I hear the alarm in the morning knowing I am alive for another day. Living with an organ transplant is not easy and it's expensive in the USA. It's a lot of specialists. I take daily anti-rejection pills that have nasty side effects like hand tremors, bone loss and bouts of cancer. I hate needles, but I can't avoid them. I had to give up dreams like crossing the Boston Marathon finish line, making it to Everest Base Camp or the hardest of them all, having my own children. But I honestly wouldn't change a thing.

While I stand here today because of the amazing western medicine advancements, I want this gift to last as long as possible. I want to be on the least number of pills, which tends to be the go-to solution in western medicine. It was apparent shortly after my transplant that I had to be responsible for my entire care. It was overwhelming navigating the complex USA healthcare system. I regularly see a general doctor, a nephrologist, a dermatologist, a gynecologist, plus an infectious disease expert.

I inherently knew I could not live with only that team. In 2009, I had my first myofascial massage and had immediate neuropathy relief in my legs due to scar tissue release from many abdominal surgeries. In 2011, I studied at UCSD to be a personal trainer to help me understand this new body and offset the bone deterioration I experienced because of Prednisone. In 2014, I began acupuncture and experienced immediate healing benefits. In 2015, I started to study Reiki and eventually have become a Karuna Holy Fire Reiki Master to help heal myself. In 2018 I got certified in Relaxation Yoga and Yoga Nidra to help with my blood pressure and ease the flight/fight world I still lived in.

I sought the help of my first naturopath in 2020 when one of my immune suppressant medications were causing HPV and cancer risks in my reproductive area. It was my first induction to the benefits of turkey tail mushrooms and other herbs like curcumin to help reduce the cancer risks.

Talk therapy continued throughout the years off and on but it never really got to the core of numbness I felt. Hypnotherapy and Reiki helped a little but it wasn't enough. In recent years, my Father then followed by my 2nd brother both alcoholics died by suicide. I remember thinking "Great, another trauma experience to add to my already full complex PTSD diagnosis!".

By then I was a vocal advocate for transplantation and organ donation, but I was clueless on how to advocate for severe mental health diagnosis. I went through a Suicide Survivors program and learned about tapping, EMDR and mindfulness techniques that I incorporated.

After the pandemic, I quit my corporate job and decided in 2022 to move away from LA and I chose the settle in Costa Rica. The healing energy of its vibrant nature is palatable.

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I knew on my very first visit this is where I needed to be to deeply heal and more importantly thrive.

In January of this year, I met Dr. Randi Raymond, the local naturopath around Jaco. She was the first practitioner to spend 1.5 hour just talking to me. I did the Quantum Scan which highlighted many organ and mineral deficiencies. We started using the RIFE frequency machine, initially on skin issues and then specifically on the cysts on my native kidneys and liver. I resumed regular acupuncture and started slowly incorporating natural probiotics and teas.

I knew Dr. Randi (as she is lovingly known) also did psylocibin treatments but I was scared and ill-informed. I volunteered at two clinician retreats to witness firsthand what their experiences were like. I saw these amazing shifts in these doctors so something told me I needed to pursue it. By then I had a lot of trust in Dr. Randi and was seeing the benefits of the other modalities she used on me.

We both were cautious so decided to start with a short DMT session. The experience was hard to describe – for most of it, I saw images of black sludge all across my abdominal and reproductive area. There was an outpouring and release of all this dark negative matter with a lot of bodily shaking. Towards the end of the session, these angelic beings flew in with silk banners and weaved my abdomen back together. I sobbed for a week after that, letting years of trauma be free while working with Dr. Randi to integrate the experience.

About 3 weeks later, I did another DMT session. This time my father was present and there was a lot of rage towards him that surfaced. There was a moment of seeing him as a child being abused and then it faded. A level of forgiveness was felt. The most profound image was seeing myself in my 80's with long grey hair. I have never believed, nor been told I could believe, I would live to an old age. For me, the image was telling me it is a possibility and was emotionally very liberating.

A month ago, I did my first psilocybin treatment. I was intimidated because I knew it would be more emotional unlike DMT. I also felt it would open the decades of bottled up grief and sadness and I was scared once I started crying, I would not stop. We started with 2mg and then I asked for another 1mg after an hour. The floodgates opened, with the initial hours all around my lost childhood. The experience transitioned to my transplant. The weight of responsibility to my friend to do everything possible to not screw it up. The expectation of receiving the gift unconditionally without feeling like I owed my friend anything. The utter exhaustion of the ongoing medical care and surgeries, something I had never expressed before for fear of seeming ungrateful. There was a lot of deep sadness and anger to acknowledge those feelings, which I'm still processing.

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I share these 3 plant medicine experiences because I was a non-believer. I was terrified of doing anything to harm my transplanted kidney. Yet I also knew all the other modalities I had tried and incorporated over the years wasn't getting to the core of my brain to release myself from the numbness, and constant flight and fight mode. Randi and others who know me have said I reversed age at least 10 years after those sessions. I know I will do future ones because I still feel there are layers to unravel.

As you can see, I fundamentally believe in integrated medicine – western, eastern, holistic, spiritual, plant. There is no way I would be alive on this stage if I only followed western medicine practices. I feel the next step is helping to remove the stigma; while releasing the burden off the patient to create a custom wellness plan with a range of modalities. This is where I see Emergent Wellness and Elev8 Health is meeting a long overdue gap in healthcare. I didn't realize it but this is what I have been piecemealing together since I left home 39 years ago. I know it's why I am now in Costa Rica and why I feel my most important advocacy work is just getting started.