

Editorial

David Peters

Editor-in-chief



The heart of the matter

In everyday life and language we associate the heart with love, emotion and compassion. Until lately though, medical science would have none of this, assuming ever since Harvey discovered the blood-circulation that the heart is just a pump. By draining the body of emotion, and placing the mind in the head, high science opened a rift between felt-sense and modern medicine. But the gap is beginning to close. New insights into the heart-brain connection are bringing body and mind back together.

Pre-modern European medicine believed the emotions came from the body; Traditional Chinese Medicine still speaks of the angry liver, the melancholy spleen, the anxious kidney.¹ Though ideas from distant times and far-off cultures carry deep wisdom, it would be a mistake to swallow them whole. Holists need to make post-modern sense of the mind-body; we need a mind-full holistic physiology for our time, and a holistic psychology that is less disembodied. Can science lend a hand here? Our brain-centred culture likens the brain to a computer, but the brain does not work digitally; it uses analogy to relate thoughts, feelings and impulses to one another. Inevitably, emotions are coloured by unconscious memories, for our earliest experiences are beyond recall: bodily experiences of the pressures of being born, infantile sensations from mouth, gut, skin, genitals; and at times, overwhelming feelings of pain, rage, fear. Stephen Porges' polyvagal theory explains how these intense bodily currents of tranquility or agitation move through the autonomic nervous system stirring or calming the heart, and that the heart responds by sending intense waves of information to the brain via the vagus nerve.² How well we learned to tolerate and make sense of emotions may depend on 'a good enough mother'³, who could bear to hold these torrents and tides of feeling, and so allow a deeply embodied memory bank of calmness, bliss and attachment to form. Allan N Schore⁴ explains the neurophysiology of this 'affect regulation' process in his important new map of embodied mind and emotional development.

It seems science has begun to make sense of feelings and their bodily origins in heart and brain. In this issue, Tony Yardley-Jones introduces the new field of neurocardiology which views the heart as a potentially powerful source of positive feelings. Max Fravell speculates on the heart's intelligence and how its hormonal, nervous,

rhythmic and electromagnetic outputs may regulate cognition and feeling. The heart, he tells us, is a sensory organ and the rhythmic, regulatory core of our being, rather than just a pump. Harvey Zarren, a cardiologist who shares these views, writes about the importance of exploring physical, mental, emotional, spiritual and tribal needs and discomforts when healing the heart. Mary Brice describes just such an approach in her development of holistic cardiac community nursing.

Joanna Macy and John Seed's deep ecological invocation of the elements is a reminder of our connectedness with planetary processes. The same flows of love and physicality are powerfully conveyed in Alex Grey's evocative painting. Chris Drury's landscape *Heart of Reeds* and Philip Kilner's description of his flowform sculptures and high-tech investigations of intricate cardiac blood flow continue the theme. These metaphors of heart and flow are extended in the Triodos Bank's appeal for a more heartfelt approach to finance.

The last section of this issue reports on new research into the impact of body-oriented meditation on students' wellbeing. This is yet another piece of evidence in favour of mind-body interventions (MBI), an area overviewed with a particular focus on cardiovascular disease by one of the field's pioneers – Ken Pelletier. Though he sees MBI as the heart of the matter, William Bloom introduces a note of caution, because 'a change of heart' will mean overcoming psychological resistance when introducing self-managed mind-body healthcare.

References

- 1 Ots T. The angry liver, the anxious heart and the melancholy spleen. *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* 1990; 14, 21-58.
- 2 Porges SW. Emotion: An evolutionary by-product of the neural regulation of the autonomic nervous system. In: CS Carter, B Kirkpatrick, & II Lederhendler (eds) *The Integrative Neurobiology of Affiliation. Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 1997; 807, 62-77.
- 3 Winnicott DW. *The child, the family and the outside world*. London: Penguin, 1964.
- 4 Grotstein JS, Schore AN. *Affect regulation and the origin of the self: the neurobiology of emotional development*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Inc, 1994.

Your editor will be doing his own heart good when he runs his fifth half marathon at Windsor on September 24th. He hopes to crack one hour fifty. Sponsorship donations to the BHMA can be made via the website.

Roz Carroll will be talking about Allan Schore's ideas at the annual BHMA conference on December 2nd.