



Changing Habits, Changing Lives: An Interview With Dr Julian Whitaker, MD, of the Whitaker Wellness Institute

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Julian Whitaker, MD, is the director and founder of the Whitaker Wellness Institute in Newport Beach, California. Since 1991, he has been the editor of Health and Healing newsletter, with a circulation of more than 2.5 million readers nationwide.

Dr Whitaker graduated from Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire, in 1966 and received his MD in 1970 from Emory University School of Medicine in Atlanta, Georgia. He completed his surgical internship at Grady Memorial Hospital, also in Atlanta, in 1971, and continued his medical training at the University of California in San Francisco.

In 1974, Dr Whitaker founded the California Orthomolecular Medical Society, along with 4 other physicians and the Nobel prize-winning scientist Linus Pauling, PhD. He is also founder of the nonprofit Freedom of Health Foundation (to educate consumers) and the Whitaker Health Freedom Foundation (engaged in lobbying and other political activities), which are dedicated to protecting freedom of choice in medicine. Dr Whitaker is author of 13 books including the best-selling Shed 10 Years in 10 Weeks (Simon & Schuster, 1999) and host of The Dr Whitaker Show, which broadcasts weekly on radio stations across the country.

IMCJ: When and why did you decide to get involved in integrative medicine?

Dr Whitaker: In 1976 I was fascinated by the writings of Nathan Pritikin [a nutritionist and pioneer in longevity research], who was using a low-fat, high-fiber diet and exercise program as treatment for diabetes, heart disease, and high blood pressure. I had recently gotten out of medical school, where I learned nothing about the rather significant relationships between diet and disease. So here was a discipline that 1970s medical students had not been exposed to, even though it was clearly present in the medical literature dating back 20 to 30 years. I went to work at Pritikin's clinic for 6 weeks, and I saw that, with diet and exercise programs as primary therapies, people got well—not got better, got well. They no longer required medication for cholesterol, blood pressure, angina, or diabetes, and they also lost substantial amounts of weight. So that was the model around which I built my own medical practice.

Julian Whitaker, MD, a physician for 39 years, is the director and founder of the Whitaker Wellness Institute in Newport Beach, California, a total-immersion program he has labeled Back to Health.

IMCJ: How long after your work at the Pritikin clinic did you open the Whitaker Wellness Institute?

Dr Whitaker: I left there in about 1977 and opened the institute in January of 1979. Basically, I spent 2 years putting together the educational program that I then presented to the patients. I opened the clinic with the idea that it would be a medical treatment facility that was a destination point from anywhere in the country, the world even. Mine is a very different approach from the one that most inte-

grative physicians—or physicians in general—follow. Most integrative physicians set out to practice just like other physicians, in a conscribed area code, where patients come in and are evaluated, then leave, follow a regimen, and come back for follow up. I wanted patients coming in and staying for at least a week, undergoing medical evaluation, undergoing diet changes, undergoing medical therapies, all over a period of time, then leaving.

IMCJ: Is that what the institute calls its Back to Health Program?

Dr Whitaker: Yes. During the week(s) patients are here, we provide an educational program and a wide range of safe, noninvasive physician-supervised therapies for serious diseases to patients from

all over the world. They're all housed together, eat together, exercise together, and attend educational seminars together. Yet each patient receives from his or her physician an individualized treatment program to address his or her specific health concerns.

IMCJ: So the team aspect has been in operation since the very beginning?

Dr Whitaker: Since the very beginning. We do have local patients who come in just to receive treatment or have consultations, but the basic premise has remained the same.

IMCJ: What made you decide that this was the best approach to practicing medicine versus what your colleagues were doing?

Dr Whitaker: It gives you the opportunity to educate. It's very hard to make lifestyle changes and develop healthy habits with just a 1-hour doctor visit. When patients stay for 2 weeks, that means they have 2 weeks of a new diet, 2 weeks of a new exercise

program, and 2 weeks of lectures and education. In 2 weeks, you can truly begin to develop new habits.

IMCJ: Since your patients are willing to come in for a week or more, I imagine they are people who already have an awareness of the importance of a healthy lifestyle and are ready to make a change. Is that true?

Dr Whitaker: Exactly. It's a very select group of patients who come to the Back to Health Program. They know what they want when they come. It's not like they are just checking in to see what I'm like. They already know what we do.

IMCJ: Will you explain how the program works? A patient has a 1-, 2-, or 3-week option?

Dr Whitaker: Yes; the amount of time the patient can stay predicts how intense the program is going to be.

IMCJ: What's an average day like for a patient who's staying a week?

Dr Whitaker: New patients arrive on Sunday and meet that evening in the hotel near the clinic. They have an orientation where my staff and I welcome them and let them know what to expect for the rest of the week. The next day is devoted primarily to physician evaluations and diagnostics. Each patient spends an hour with his or her physician during the initial exam, and they also have follow-up visits during the week. The doctor orders a blood panel and other tests as indicated and recommends appropriate therapies.

Then, patients are really busy the rest of the week. Depending on their conditions, they may spend several hours a day undergoing therapies and, for sure, every day they attend lectures by our physicians and professional staff. We have talks on exercise, nutrition, hormones, and natural approaches to our most common diseases. We have cooking classes, relaxation sessions, and organized exercise instruction. We also encourage patients to walk the short distance between the clinic and the hotel. In fact, we give them pedometers when they get here and award prizes to those who walk the most. They eat all of their meals with us, prepared by the same professional chef I've worked with for more than 20 years. So as you can see, it's a total immersion.

IMCJ: At any given time, how many patients do you have?

Dr Whitaker: It varies. Some weeks we have up to 70 patients in the program, staying in the hotel and eating meals with us, and then sometimes we will have only 25 to 30 patients. We have an inflow of new patients every week, so it depends on how many are coming in and how many are continuing to stay. Of course, we also have local patients.

IMCJ: How many people do you have on staff?

Dr Whitaker: Sixty, including 3 MDs and 3 DOs.

IMCJ: What services do you offer?

Dr Whitaker: We offer a number of diagnostics in-house such as a full-service lab, treadmill stress tests, echocardiogram, dual-energy x-ray absorptiometry (DEXA) bone scan, X-ray, spirometry, and bio-impedance analysis. We have an intravenous (IV) department where we offer EDTA [ethylene diamine tetra-acetic acid] chelation as well as IV vitamin C, glutathione, and a number of specialized drips for various conditions. We have a very large hyperbaric oxygen department with the capacity to treat 70 patients a day. We have 7 EEC [enhanced external counterpulsation] beds for treating patients with angina, heart failure, and circulation problems. We have infrared light, microcurrent, and physical therapy departments. We have a physician who is very experienced in prolotherapy. We have acupuncturists, chiropractors, reflexologists, and massage therapists on staff. I believe we have more therapies under one roof than any integrative medical clinic in the country.

IMCJ: How did you find patients in the beginning?

Dr Whitaker: This is probably the most important thing for newly minted integrative doctors to understand—wherever

you're drawing patients from, you have to educate the community that you're there. They're not going to find you. You've got to make sure you find them. You can do that by writing articles in newspapers, by doing speaking engagements, by participating in radio shows. I did all of these things when I was first building my practice. If there's one thing that's absolutely true about integrative physicians, they will get no referrals from any other doctor of any kind. They will have more doctors as patients than they will have doctor referrals.

IMCJ: What do you recommend that doctors do to increase referrals?

Dr Whitaker: Over the last 30 years, patient referrals to Whitaker Wellness from other physicians, chiropractors, or naturopaths have been virtually nonexistent. We concentrate on referrals from patients, not doctors. To increase referrals and get patients, you have to get out and beat the bushes. You can't sit back and say, look, I have a better mousetrap. Nobody cares. They need to understand why you're different, why you're good. It's like any other business, and you have to treat it like a business. You have to have confidence in your integrity, confidence in your abilities, confidence in your staff, and then you have to let people know you're available.

IMCJ: How do you handle billing? Do you accept insurance?

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Dr Whitaker: Billing is predicated upon what therapies the patients take and how long they stay. We do not accept insurance, and we've opted out of Medicare. However, we do provide our patients with courtesy billing, and many, although not all, of our services are reimbursable.

IMCJ: What made you decide to start your own supplement line?

Dr Whitaker: I started my own line back in the '80s. I was recommending relatively high levels of vitamins and minerals, and they simply weren't available as multivitamin formulas in those doses. My patients complained about having to take a dozen different supplements, so I thought, why not formulate my own? That's what I did. Over the years, I added other products such as fish oil. Then I started writing the newsletter, and it was very successful. And subscribers started calling with the same problem of finding high-dose supplements, so we decided to take my original products and began wedding them to the newsletter, marketing them to the same people who were reading the newsletter. Right now, in my medical practice, we use my line, but we also use a large variety of other supplements from other vendors.

IMCJ: How do you handle quality assurance for your own line?

Dr Whitaker: I'm very comfortable with quality assurance of Healthy Directions, the company that makes my private line. We have an independent lab assay all of our products. If a label claims to have 100 mg of B₆ in it, it has 100 mg of B₆. We also test for purity: pesticides, heavy metals, and the like. The other focus is on efficacy. Everything we have in the Healthy Directions line has been studied for efficacy. I don't believe in "sizzle"—adding a few milligrams of something just to say it's in the product. My supplements contain nutrients in the amounts shown by scientific research to be most efficacious.

IMCJ: Do you have any success stories you want to share?

Dr Whitaker: We almost always see improvement. For example, if a patient comes in for high blood pressure on only 1 drug, we are nearly 100% successful at eliminating the need for drugs. If they have 2 drugs, we are about 85% to 100% successful at weaning them off both drugs. If patients have angina—even if they've been recommended to have angioplasty or bypass—with EECF and other therapies, they can usually avoid surgery. If they've had a stroke, we treat them with hyperbaric oxygen and, 9 times out of 10, they regain function, even if it's been months or years after the stroke. If patients come in with diabetic ulcers on a lower extremity, if it hasn't infected the bone, we are virtually 100% successful in healing the open ulcer, and we have numerous cases of prevention of amputation.

One patient, his name was Jerome, called the clinic from a hospital bed. He was going into surgery the next morning for amputation due to a nonhealing diabetic ulcer on his foot. He was a schoolteacher, and he'd called his sub to talk about being out the rest of the year. The sub had heard of my clinic and told Jerome about it. Long story short, he checked out of the hospital

against medical advice and came to the clinic. We treated the wound with sugar dressing, gave him chelation and other therapies, started him on a nutrition program, and got his diabetes under control. Today Jerome is walking around on his own 2 feet. We see things like this all the time.

IMCJ: What, exactly, is a sugar dressing?

Dr Whitaker: When sugar or honey is packed on the top and inside of an open wound, it dissolves in the fluid exuding from the wound—creating a hyperosmotic, or highly concentrated, medium where bacteria cannot live. Scientists have tested the viability of many types of bacteria, including *Klebsiella*, *Shigella*, *Staphylococcus aureus*, and *Streptococcus pyogenes*, and none of them have been able to survive in a honey or sugar solution.

In addition to curbing infection, this therapy facilitates healing in other ways. First, it draws fluid out of the wound, which reduces edema. Second, it provides a covering to or filling for the wound and thus prevents scabbing and promotes granulation. Last, it encourages the removal of dead tissue to make way for new growth. The net result is rapid healing with minimal scarring.

IMCJ: That sounds intriguingly unconventional, which brings us to your foundations. Would you say a bit about them?

Dr Whitaker: The mission of the Freedom of Health Foundation, a 501(c)(3), is to maintain choice in the medical marketplace and educate everyone on their freedom of health rights. Whenever the US government, state governments, or pharmaceutical industry attempt to suppress the truth about alternative medical therapies and/or nutritional supplementation, we will oppose them and intervene by educating and informing the American public. The goal of the Whitaker Health Freedom Foundation, a 501(c)(4), is to actively engage in lobbying and other political activities that are strictly limited under the auspices of a 501(c)(3).

IMCJ: What are your plans for the future? Any interest in opening other clinics?

Dr Whitaker: I want to continue to grow the outreach of the Whitaker Wellness Institute, improve the services rendered to our patients, and add new and affordable therapies that will help our patients. I've considered opening other clinics—there is certainly an interest—but I'm undecided at this point.

Andrea McCloud, MFA, a freelance writer who reports regularly on health and wellness, conducted this interview. Her book series, the *Glow Guides*, including *Meditation*, *Yoga*, and *Spa*, is published by Chronicle Books. Most recently, she was a contributing writer for the revised edition of *Arthritis: An Alternative Medicine Definitive Guide* (Alternativemedicine.com Books, 2006). She lives in Brentwood, California.