

SPAS AND WELLNESS – A NEW PHILOSOPHY FOR HARMONY IN LIFE

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ABSTRACT

The article reveals the development of spa therapy through the years and centuries and its revival by receiving renewed attention from many medical specialties and health tourists. According to their character spas nowadays reflect the progress of science and culture of mankind. The accent is on the contemporary understanding of spa which is based on health promotion and prevention of illnesses. The idea for health prophylaxis has reached a higher level which serves as a base for the foundations of wellness conception. The idea of this conception is aspiration for achieving complete prosperity of the human personality by synergy of all aspects of health – physical, mental, intellectual, emotional and social.

Keywords: *spa, wellness, health prevention*

Picture a dangerous cliff where people are continually falling off and getting hurt. Ambulances come to pick up the injured and take them to the hospital, where high costs are needed to bring them back to health. Now think about how much smarter it would be for someone to build a fence at the top of that cliff – a fence that would prevent people from falling off in the first place. Spas are fences.

Alex Szekely

Throughout the ages the interest in the use of water in medicine has changed from century to century and from nation to nation. The (medical) world has viewed it in different ways, from very approving to extremely critical, and from beneficial to harmful. Today, spa therapy is receiving renewed attention from many medical specialists and health tourists, and having a revival (28).

AIM

The aim of the article is to reveal the development of spa therapy from ancient times to present day influenced by the progress of science and culture of mankind and reaching a higher level of understanding and using spas for health promotion and wellbeing in all aspects of human health thus reaching the highest point of physical, mental, intellectual, emotional and social wellness.

Articles and sites reviewed here are mainly based on researches about spa history, wellness and spa tourism, balneotherapy and spa therapy in common and for the treatment of some diseases,

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A Brief History of Spas:

There are different theories for the origin of word “spa”. Some say these words were scratched onto the walls of ancient roman baths as acronym for “salude per aqua” (health through water) (28). Others consider that the word “spa” comes from the Walloon word “espa” meaning fountain. This came from the name of the Belgian town Spa, where in the 14th century a healing, thermal spring was discovered. Some say that spa originates from the Latin word “spagere” (to scatter, sprinkle, moisten) (14). Regardless of the origin throughout the history of mankind since ancient times people have turned to some kind of spa rituals for healing.

Taking the waters used to be a popular treatment for a wide range of diseases in classical times. Historical references track spas not only to ancient Romans, but to Sumerian, Egyptian, Greek, Indian and Asian cultures (6). The Greeks preferred baths in fresh water from natural sources, although bathing in the sea (thalassotherapy) was also applied. In Homeric times, bathing was primarily used for cleansing and hygienic purposes. By the time of Hippocrates (460–370BC), bathing was considered more than a simple hygienic measure; it was healthy and beneficial for most diseases (13). Influenced by the Greeks, the Romans built their own thermal baths at mineral and thermal springs. Asclepiades (c. 124 BC), a Greek physician who practiced in Rome, started using general hydrotherapy and drinking cures as treatments. He recommended bathing for therapeutic purposes and prevention (13). Galen (AD 131–201) also advocated the use of water for the treatment of a variety of diseases (17). With the fall of the Roman Empire and the rise of Christianity, the bathing culture was compromised and bathing was officially prohibited. Faith in cure through religious devotion and praying was regarded as more important than a medicinal bath. Around 1800 interest in the bathing culture grew again. Attempts to analyze the mineral water were made, aiming at improving its use in medicine, and at preparing mixtures of water identical to those mineral waters famous for their curative properties (4)

Principles of Spas:

The main principle of spas is the holistic approach first advocated by Kneipp – “the total per-

son” is treated across physical, mental and spiritual domains. Spa treatment uses non-invasive methods and natural sources (water, heat, massage, herbal remedies, diet, exercises etc.) helping the body in activating its own healing mechanisms (6).

Spas have become an important subtype of a movement toward alternative medicine because of the appeal of this naturopathic approach and a growing skepticism of conventional medicine. But now many doctors admit that alternative medicine seems to do better job for the wellness of patients at lower cost than conventional health care and they are trying to learn from it (14). Conventional medicine has a lot to offer, especially for patients who struggle to manage and cure disease. The spa and wellness industry has an immense amount to offer particularly for maintaining wellness and preventing disease as well as providing healing and benefit with various wellness modalities to health seekers (11).

In the modern world a small amount of resources is used for prevention of diseases. Great quality of money is spent on expensive treatments. Spas offer different kinds of treatments considered to be therapeutic for a variety of clinical conditions and encourages healthy lifestyle that prevents the development of different diseases and maintains health and vitality during the process of aging.

Evolution of Spas:

The character of spas reflects the progress of science and culture of mankind. They are an evolutionary result whose origin is found in ancient practices. The development of science gives them a new meaning so that they have become a base for differentiation of new branches of clinical medicine such as hydrology, hydrotherapy and balneology. The transition from achieving therapeutic effect towards purposeful treatment and rehabilitation continues its evolutionary development reaching the contemporary understanding of spa which is based on health promotion and prevention of illnesses. The change in hydrotherapeutic practices includes enriching their range of motion in time. The idea for health prophylaxis reaches higher level which serves as a base for the foundations of wellness conception. The idea of this concept is aspiration of achieving complete prosperity of human personality by synergy of all aspects

of health – physical, mental, intellectual, emotional and social.

In the past decades, a large change in the use of mineral water for the treatment of several diseases has taken place in continental Europe. The medical significance of bathing is now acknowledged, especially by many rheumatologists and dermatologists (15,20), and this aspect is considered more important for a number of spa resorts than prestige and leisure. Bathing is usually combined with many other treatments, such as physical exercises, hydrotherapy and mud packs (17).

An important point of spa treatment is combining hydrotherapy with other ways of influencing the patient (climate, surrounding environment, individual regimen of diet, exercises, electrotherapy and physiotherapy, heat therapy, different kind of eastern practices etc.). Thus spa treatment nowadays uses not only the healing power of the water but also the healing power of nature (physiological component of spa). Changing the surrounding environment and microclimate, escaping from everyday troubles forms the psychological component of spa.

Types of Spas:

The spa resorts are differentiated according to their location (seaside, mountain area) and the chemical composition of their mineral water (sulphurous, bicarbonated or sulphated). Each spring has its own characteristics and related therapeutic properties. However, a substantial number of spa resorts also direct more attention towards leisure. Steam baths, saunas, whirlpools, and solariums are standard equipment of many such spa resorts, with the main objective being to relax and strengthen the body and mind, and to prevent development of disease (28).

Today the number of spas in Europe has grown substantially and their offers are so diverse that could be hardly defined. For better understanding and organization of that variety of spas the International Spa Association (ISPA) determines ten domains or segments of the spa industry:

1. Water
2. Nutrition and diets
3. Movement, kinesitherapy and fitness
4. Massages and bodywork
5. Mind, body and spirit

6. Aesthetics, skincare, nature factors for sustaining beauty
7. Climatology, global ecology, material environment
8. Social and cultural values, culture of spas
9. Management, marketing, execution
10. Time, rhythm, cyclic recurrence

A spa does not include all these domains. Spas are manifesting in different ways and accents – from daily spas to spas for a week or more, therapeutic spas, cruise spas, hotel spas, etc.

The International Spa Association (ISPA) has defined spas as "... places devoted to overall well-being through a variety of professional services that encourage the renewal of mind, body and spirit" (ISPA, 2009).

The Influence of Spas:

The effect of spas is scientifically proven as far as hydrotherapy, balneotherapy and the influence of climate are concerned and not only (9). The mechanism of action of spas is based on complex reflex and humoral influences over human body (22) which provoke distinctive reactions and this is called "stimulatio". This principle of stimulation which uses naturally set by the human body reactions is probably the most ancient curative principle where the methods physical therapy, balneotherapy and other kinds of resort healing prevail. Usually this is connected with activating the system hypothalamus-hypophysis-suprarenal gland and stimulates the mechanism of adaption to a nonspecific stimulant that takes the human body to a new higher level of reactivity and thus helps patient to overcome stress and potential illnesses or to fight chronic diseases. This irritating stimulation is a kind of nonspecific reactive regulating therapy which is expressed in a readjustment of body's reactivity (5).

The desired therapeutic effect does not occur immediately. Days and sometimes weeks are necessary to achieve this effect. Sometimes even a balneology reaction may occur. But achieved results are long lasting, they lead to stable remission of chronic diseases and contribute to the wellbeing of patients (19).

Spas, Wellness and Wellbeing:

Spas tend to be more proactive than other health interventions focusing on prevention and working with healthy populations before any kind of ailment

has occurred. Spas have the potential to help navigate the process of aging not only by alleviating physical signs of age but helping people find psychological wellbeing (14). Reasonably spas are part of wellness. And here comes the question “What is wellness?”

The word “wellness” derives from two English words –wellbeing (welfare; health, happiness and prosperity) and fitness (the state of being physically fit) (18). If you search in Google images of wellness healthy smiling people, relaxing in Spa in a new high star hotel will appear on your screen. But actually wellness is not a rest. Wellness is a way of life – more different and proactive. Wellness is a philosophy considering that health is the natural condition of our bodies. The strategy of wellness is to keep body and soul together in good condition. Wellness slows down aging. Wellness is a synonym of prophylaxis as far as it shows a way to avoid illness and the subsequent taking of drugs.

According to the American doctor John Travis who is considered to be the father of wellness - wellness is a choice – a personal decision for achieving an optimal health condition, wellness is a way of life, wellness is not a static condition, this is a process – a raising consciousness of the fact that there is no end and health and happiness are absolutely possible and reachable at any moment of our life here and now. Wellness means achieving harmony between body, mind and spirit, becoming aware of the fact that everything that one does, things, feels and believes has its reflection over one’s personal life and the life of the planet. Wellness means to accept and love oneself (25).

The problem is not in the diseases and their symptoms, as they are the last effort of the body to solve a problem. Traditional medicine nowadays treats and eliminates the superficial problems and needs, the external signs of health disorders (the symptoms) and this is not insignificant at all, but it is not enough. For the complete healing it is necessary to go under the surface. Wellness extends the boundaries of health care including a specific process of integration characterized with awareness, training and growth.

The spa industry, with its tremendous scope and worldwide reach, is poised, perhaps more than any other industry, to lead our culture into the next

century, and into the next paradigm of living (29). The wellness and spa industries are coming into their apogee of development. This kind of industry is now not only a pleasant experience but a slogan of active vital behavior directed to wellbeing. Today more and more people are looking for the variety of professional services that spas offer. The number of the so-called health tourists, who combine their holidays with an investment in wellbeing is growing with every year. This is a precondition for permanent striving for innovations and professionalism, introduction of new modern technologies and developing of programs for education and training of qualified specialists (12,16).

Evidence for the Usefulness of Spas:

In the last decades several randomized controlled trials have studied the effects of spa therapy in rheumatoid arthritis (10,16) and osteoarthritis (2,23,24) indicating that spa therapy with home exercises may be superior to home exercise alone in the management of patients with general osteoarthritis associated with knee OA (7,8). A study with patients suffering from ankylosing spondylitis demonstrates that significant improvements in function, pain, global wellbeing, and morning stiffness were found nine months after spa therapy (27).

However, the exact therapeutic potential of spa therapy still remains largely unknown. (28). Better and more profound scientific evidence and additional randomized control trials are necessary to clarify the mechanisms of action and the effects of the application of thermal treatments (9) either in the sphere of its physiological and its psychological component as a major tool for stress relieving, improving body function and preventing illness.

CONCLUSION

Spa today is a place where everyone can find remedy for mind, body and soul. People visit spas for keeping in good shape, manage stress, find tranquility, health, wellness or just for pleasure. Spas offer a great variety of methods – traditional and contemporary, eastern and western with the aim is to satisfy the great variety of needs of their customers – Swiss massage, shiatsu, Thai massage, acupuncture, therapies with Moroccan oil and mud, aromatherapy, minerals from the Dead Sea, watsu, thalassotherapy, hypnotherapy, reiki, meditation, yoga and

many others. But as in ancient times water remains the heart of nowadays spas with all the rituals that proceed from it.

Today spas adopt and claim their origin from water and are permanently seeking new ways to express this over and over again.

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