

What is the British Holistic Medical Association?



The British Holistic Medical Association (BHMA) is a grassroots organisation funded by our supporters with no corporate or government sponsorship. We are therefore able to speak out without fear or favour.

We are a registered charity with a single charitable objective: to educate doctors, other healthcare professionals and the general public in the principles and practice of holistic medicine. Like so many human issues, this is not a simple task. Our website wishes to honour and celebrate this complexity yet be accessible and interesting to the general reader. *We all* have a stake in our health services.

Why is the BHMA needed?

*The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes
but in having new eyes.*

– Marcel Proust

We believe that many of the problems we face in the 21st century come from taking too narrow a view of the human predicament. Being human is complex and seems to become ever more so. When ill health arises it is often most expedient to quickly simplify, categorise, label and anonymise. Yet this often entails ignoring or brushing aside the crucial paradoxes, contradictions and contexts that largely comprise *meaning in relationships*. These are often concealed within and around the immediate issue. We can all oversimplify like this for our own reasons – the patient, the patient’s family, the healthcare professional, the commissioning and service managers and, of course, the politicians responsible for setting policy. We all allow

deeper problems to fester below the surface often without knowing it. Then we lose sight of what lies beneath.

The human spirit glows from that small inner doubt whether we are right, while those who believe with complete certainty that they possess the right are dark inside and darken the world outside with cruelty, pain and injustice.

– Saul Alinsky (Rules for Radicals)

Facing the complexity of being human is not the same as mastery. We do not need to know or control everything. A holistic understanding often emerges from attention to small [details of human interactions](#) which give us glimpses of the heart and soul of a person, of a community, of a whole society. By embracing our own uncertainty and vulnerability we are more likely to liberate our imagination, and so find meaning and purpose in our own lives and in the lives of others. This is often key to our best healing and palliation.

The slenderest knowledge that may be obtained of the highest things is more desirable than the most certain knowledge of lesser things.

– Saint Thomas Aquinas (in *Paths to the Devine: Ancient and*

Indian by Vensus A George)

We make meaning through connection with ourselves, with others and with nature. The more we focus on these crucial connections, the more we move from things to people, from success to caring, from money-wealth to person-wealth, the more meaning we will find.

This is very difficult for all concerned so long as science-derived evidence, technology, algorithms and guidelines (with their aura of often spurious certainty) so decisively dominate the healthcare world. This biomedicine may be complicated in detail but it is narrow in scope;

too narrow to grasp human complexity.

The human encounters that offer a chance of a healing connection require the imaginative projection we call empathy. Without this, our encounters remain unimaginatively mechanistic: our quest for technical data or instruction displaces our need for shared humanity and vulnerability – we all feel less humanly connected. If we are to find meaning in our own and another's suffering, the 'evidence' must be drawn from a wider range of experience and knowledge; for instance, poetry, drama, fiction, visual arts, philosophy, practical crafts, perhaps dancing or digging the earth or watching a bird build its nest in Spring...

Life is never made unbearable by circumstances, but only by lack of meaning and purpose.

– Viktor Frankl (Man's Search for Meaning)

Healthcare systems across the developed world are struggling to cope with both the human task and the economic cost. It is often said that this is because we are living longer and medical treatments are becoming more complicated and expensive. This view is true but too restricted. Just as simple explanations of illness in an individual are often inadequate, so it is with the healthcare crisis. A more holistic, more personal and less industrial approach enables our fuller responses.

We must be wary of Simplicity and her sister Certainty. Attempts to simplify and categorise our way out of Life's complexity are like digging ourselves into a hole: the world becomes quieter, lonelier and darker. We are now living with our consequent problems, which tragically germinate the 'cruelty, pain and injustice' Alinsky witnessed (see quotation above).

Increasingly we tend to treat illness as our enemy rather than our teacher.

It is precisely in a broken age that we need mystery and a reawakened sense of wonder: need them in order to be whole again.

– Ben Okri (A way of being free)

What does the word *holistic* mean?

The above section shows what the BHMA means by a holistic understanding of healthcare. But can we actually define the word? Like the word *love*, the reality usually transcends any attempt at a definition. However, our mission is to show how it is possible to talk about holistic healthcare and to develop it meaningfully. In fact, there is no suitable alternative word in the English language. Perhaps any '[nation of shopkeepers](#)' has little use for the concept! A South African, Jan Smuts coined the term 'holism' in 1926. Smuts was a 'prominent South African and British Commonwealth statesman, military leader and philosopher' prior to the establishment of apartheid (which idea he did not support).

Interestingly, the African word [ubuntu](#) comes closest to the meaning used by the BHMA.

The dictionary definition of holism (from the Greek *holos*) states that nothing can be fully understood unless one sees the whole system of which it is part; that is the whole is always more than the sum of its parts. This has the same linguistic roots as whole, holy and health. At the BHMA we use the word in this sense, not in the more restricted sense of its association with Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM). Many different forms of healthcare practice are included under this umbrella term. Many CAM practitioners work in a way that we would accept as holistic. Yet some do not. For more see [this article](#).

What does the BHMA do?

We provide **a home and a bold, critical voice** for those wanting healthcare that puts *humanity*

and values first.

We publish the high quality ***Journal of Holistic Healthcare*** (JHH) three times per year in both digital and paper formats. This journal is aimed at a wide readership both within and beyond the healthcare professions. A searchable archive of JHH articles since 2004 is under development. We also publish newsletters from time to time.

Our **new website**, launched in May 2016, includes a radically innovative and growing feature which looks at healthcare through the *qualities of the person* – both professionals and the public. We are searching for a common language that reflects our shared humanity as the basis for all we do.

We **collaborate with like-minded organisations** for joint projects that emerge from shared aims. For example, we have worked with the Scientific and Medical Network, the College of Medicine, the Centre for Resilience at the University of Westminster and the Portland Centre for Integrative Medicine in Bristol.

Find out about membership of the BHMA: <https://bhma.org/>

Read **Being Holistic** by Chair, William House, published in *JHH* Spring 2016

