

# La medicina ci fa ancora bene ?

Libri di base per il XXI secolo

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Increasingly, medicine also does more than treat the sick. We treat the well in anticipation of future disease. This certainly seems sensible: go upstream; prevention is better than cure. But is medical prevention always better?

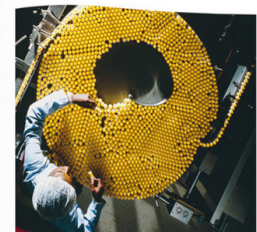
The medical alchemist prescribing statins for lowering LDL cholesterol in the asymptomatic has raised important questions: can the anticipated benefits of treatment justify the predictable side effects? By predicting the well, are we extending lives or massively increasing the population of the sick? And shouldn't we be prioritizing non-medical interventions: exercise, good nutrition, giving up smoking? Is Western medicine still good for us? Although its achievements are unparalleled, it is less certain that we have got the balance right. For decades the beneficiaries of medicine's extraordinary successes, we are in danger of becoming its victims.

Are we still certain we are doing more good than harm?



**LDL cholesterol** Low-density lipoprotein cholesterol is frequently referred to as 'bad cholesterol' and associated with heart disease.

**Medicine's hidden problems** The pharmaceutical industry is a powerful force in the world, but it is also a major source of environmental pollution. The industry's impact on the environment is a major concern.



The purview of medicine is also expanding beyond ordinary good health. It no longer restricts itself to the prevention and treatment of disease.

Where once it launched assaults on brutal killers – cholera, tuberculosis, polio – it has become increasingly possible to improve on well-being. Why restrict ourselves to the prevention of disease when, with the same technologies, we can improve on ordinary functioning? If drugs for those with attention deficits can quicken the minds of those considered normal, why not take them? And given how highly we rate mental excellence, why not make these drugs obligatory? Shouldn't we give them to schoolchildren alongside their iPads and textbooks?



2. How Effective is Medicine?

Prostate cancer is the most common cancer among men. Globally, in 2012, more than 1.1 million cases were recorded: about 15% of new cancers in men. Rates were highest in Martinique, followed by Norway and France. There are approximately 10,000 deaths in Britain a year, closer to 30,000 in the USA.

Prostate cancer is usually identified by an initial prostate-specific antigen blood test, with confirmation via biopsy. Where cancer is identified, several responses are offered: monitoring or watchful waiting; hormone therapy or some form of radiotherapy. Sometimes several treatments are combined. The difficulty is identifying which forms are life-threatening. Many men die with rather than of prostate cancer, and there is currently no reliable way to distinguish between aggressive and indolent tumours. Both radiotherapy and prostatectomy have potentially serious side effects, including bowel problems, incontinence and impotence. It is partly for fear of over-treatment that many countries avoid routine population screening for prostate cancer. Doctors and patients are therefore in a difficult position. Identifying prostate cancer is relatively straightforward. If not, in the case of biopsy, pain- or risk-free. Not having identified it, there is real uncertainty about treatment. For many, a diagnosis of cancer is terrifying, and they will opt for radical treatment to remove it. However, in many but not all cases, this means unnecessary treatment with unpleasant and enduring side effects.



**Population screening** The systematic testing of a specific, usually asymptomatic, population for a disease (described as being those who require either direct treatment or further investigation).

**MRI scans** One of a range of scans that uses powerful magnetic forces and radio waves to produce detailed images of the inside of the body. Unlike X-rays, it does not use ionising radiation and consequently has much fewer risks.

Now consider the use of MRI scans (magnetic resonance imaging) for back pain. Back pain is

## Vantaggi e svantaggi della medicina moderna. Si può cambiare qualcosa?

### Una lucida e rigorosa analisi sull'aumento dei costi, economici ed etici, della sanità nel mondo moderno

La medicina moderna ha raggiunto una pregevole eccellenza e molti di noi possono beneficiare di livelli di cura senza precedenti. Eppure il progresso medico ha un prezzo: la resistenza agli antibiotici, i superbatteri in continua mutazione e le conseguenze non intenzionali, ma comunque devastanti, della prescrizione di oppiacei sono parte integrante del panorama medico di oggi.

Cercando rimedi farmaceutici per ogni tipo di sofferenza, stiamo 'medicalizzando' troppo la naturale esperienza umana? I costi astronomici della medicina stanno favorendo la disuguaglianza a livello globale? In cosa ci ha deluso la medicina moderna e come deve cambiare?

Questo volume incisivo e provocatorio indaga l'economia e l'etica delle moderne pratiche mediche e l'impatto che hanno sulle nostre vite.

## Nella stessa collana



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