A LOOK AT THE INSTITUTE FOR FUNCTIONAL MEDICINE WITH DAVID JONES, MD

Mark A. Hyman, MD


The Institute for Functional Medicine (IFM) is a pioneering non-profit organization dedicated to the education of healthcare practitioners in a new model of medical thinking and practice based on systems medicine. I am a member of both the board of directors and the faculty of the Institute, and I serve on the faculty and advisory board of the Food as Medicine program of The Center for Mind-Body Medicine (www.cmbm.org). I believe that both these organizations and programs have the potential to address the burning need for education in novel approaches to our chronic disease epidemic.

IFM is the only provider of continuing medical education (CME) in the functional medicine field that is accredited by the Accreditation Council for Continuing Medical Education. IFM is an independent educational organization dedicated to integrating the science-based best practices of established and emerging care into an effective and cost-effective approach to treatment that can be taught to practitioners and delivered to patients. For 10 years, IFM has been educating physicians and other providers, establishing itself as a credible, effective, multidisciplinary voice for improving healthcare through

- a thorough understanding of physiological and biochemical function, from cellular to organ levels;
- knowledge of effective interventions for altering gene expression; and
- an intensive study of the fundamental biological processes that cut across organ systems and medical specialties.

The Institute has a world-renowned faculty and an international reputation, a dedicated board of directors, a highly productive and committed staff, and the vision to develop and implement a program that can change the face of healthcare.

What follows is an interview I recently conducted with the president of IFM, David Jones, MD.

Over the last few years IFM has been developing its curriculum and training. What education programs are offered?

Dr Jones: IFM has put together a clear and integrated educational program that links back to our mission, which is to serve the highest expression of individual health through widespread adoption of functional medicine as the standard of care. A key offering is the International Symposium on Functional Medicine, which is configured each year to either deepen in a very specific way the understanding of one of the 8 elements of the Functional Medicine Matrix Model or to address a significant clinical problem by exploring it through the matrix. In 2007, the 14th International Symposium drilled down in the area of endocrine function and its system-wide effects on functionality. Presentation topics included the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis, clinical manifestation of stress, celiac disease, fibromyalgia, and hypothyroid disease, to name just a few.

Twice each year, we also present a weeklong course called Applying Functional Medicine in Clinical Practice (AFMCP). This is a practical course that uses clinical cases to ask the question: if you look underneath the diagnosis to take into account both the uniqueness of the individual and his or her environmental and lifestyle factors, what are the influences that lead to the unique disease expression? By allowing the patient and clinician to bring to the table the whole human experience of each individual patient, a more robust assessment can be made, and a more individualized therapeutic plan can be instituted in partnership with the patient. This is the central experience of AFMCP.

To deepen proficiency in comprehensive care and the functional medicine perspective, we host regular Webinars that investigate, with the help of masters in functional medicine, the different categories of underlying mechanisms as well as the interventions that can help restore balance to a functional system. Recent Webinars include “Neuroprotection and Treatment: Supporting Regeneration, Slowing Degeneration” by Jay Lombard, DO; “The Tip of the Iceberg: Recognizing Celiac Disease” by Thomas O’Bryan, DC; and “TSH Tunnel Vision: Looking at the Whole Picture in Thyroid Dysfunction” by Patrick Hanaway, MD. In addition, IFM created an online forum that enhances communication between functional medicine clinicians worldwide who are working to create more successful clinical outcomes.
IFM’s symposia seem to get bigger and better each year. Can you tell us what is planned for the 2008 Symposium?

Dr Jones: The 15th International Symposium on Functional Medicine will be titled “The Many Faces of Pain: Functional Models for Assessment and Treatment,” and it will take place May 22-25 at La Costa Resort and Spa in Carlsbad, California. We will be looking at the conventional methods of evaluating pain, and our clinical workshops and research-based lectures will demonstrate the underlying mechanisms of both acute and chronic pain. The precourse held on the first day of the symposium will present breakthrough information on a comprehensive model for both assessment and treatment of chronic fatigue.

For those who are unfamiliar with it, can you describe the Textbook of Functional Medicine and tell us how people are using it?

Dr Jones: The Textbook of Functional Medicine provides the bridge from the conventional organ-system clinical paradigm into 21st-century systems biology medicine. This landmark text contains both the clarion call to action and the reasons for action. With 48 authors and nearly 5000 references from the research literature, the textbook articulates the underlying mechanisms of complex, chronic disease as well as the clinical applications of functional medicine. It is being used by practitioners throughout the United States and internationally in both clinical and educational environments. The textbook is becoming the road map used by medical schools that feature the functional medicine architecture for integrating medical care.

What other strategies is IFM employing to help spread the practice of functional medicine?

Dr Jones: We are fortunate at IFM to have inspired benefactors who have stepped forward to facilitate education in functional medicine and to enlarge the body of practitioners who are able to appropriately address complex disease issues. Through grant funds provided by these benefactors, IFM has been able to provide scholarships for our programs to faculty members, residents, and fellows from medical schools with integrative medicine programs. In addition, another private foundation has funded scholarships to registered dieticians and nutritionists to help them become equipped to be an essential part of the functional medicine chronic care team.

IFM is also developing a 2-year certification program in functional medicine that will transform the current learning opportunities into a sophisticated, comprehensive curriculum designed to change clinician behaviors to meet the challenges of 21st-century healthcare. This program eventually will provide a fellowship designation based on a clinical residency experience. In order to help conventional medical practices adapt into functional medicine practices, we have been encouraged by our board of directors to create clinical practice centers of functional medicine excellence and to consult with these centers on clinical training programs and standardized systems.

Can you elaborate on how IFM has been engaging with registered dieticians (RDs) and nutritionists? Why has IFM made this a priority?

Dr Jones: IFM has received grant funding for initiatives aimed at making nutritionists integral members of the functional medicine chronic care team along with primary care practitioners. This grant has allowed us to establish an RD/nutritionist advisory board helmed by recognized specialists, certified clinical nutritionists, and members of both the American Dietetic Association and Nutrition in Complementary Care Practice Group. Members of this board include Ruth DeBusk, PhD, RD; Kathie Swift, MS, RD; Coco Newton, RD, MPH, CCN; and Diana Noland, RD, MPH, CCN. The advisory board is working to increase awareness of functional medicine in nutrition and dietetics programs throughout the United States, as well as to clarify the principles and positions of the functional medicine nutritionist. We are also planning to update our book Clinical Nutrition: A Functional Approach with supplementary chapters on nutrigenomics and a new functional medicine clinical nutrition and cellular health assessment protocol.

What will take IFM to the next level in its effort to make functional medicine more visible to clinicians and more accessible to patients?

Dr Jones: IFM’s founders and the pioneers who developed functional medicine have worked together for nearly 30 years to create a personalized medicine that addresses the primary and comorbid conditions that plague so many of our patients. We have designed a well-developed system that provides a bridge between conventional medicine and those practices that are often thought of as alternative or integrative. We are now at the point where that methodology for both education and clinical applications is ready for everyday practice. The next step in the paradigm shift is to provide this education to a wide audience that can gain from the instruction and provide these skills to their patients. A certification program will create a formalized structure that enables far greater numbers of practitioners to receive functional medicine training and create a proficiency standard to assure patients that their healthcare providers have mastery in functional medicine.

For more information on IFM, visit www.functionalmedicine.org or call (800) 228-0622.