Principle # 1: Geriatric Principle of Synergy: Applied to an Elderly Patient with Dementia

Scripture Reference: And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it. (1 Corinthians 12:26)

Application in Geriatrics:

In the care of younger patients, one often locates an acutely diseased organ because the patient has symptoms referable to dysfunction of that organ. For example, a younger patient with a bladder infection often presents with symptoms (e.g. dysuria) that indicate irritation of the urinary bladder. In an elderly patient with dementia, the most outstanding symptom from a bladder infection may be confusion. Why?

According to scripture, when the urinary bladder hurts, the whole body hurts with the urinary bladder. What if the elderly patient already has chronic dysfunction of the brain, for example, due to Alzheimer’s disease? Could it be that, as the scripture states, when the urinary bladder hurts, the brain hurts with it? If so, a patient with significant Alzheimer’s disease may present with increased confusion when the primary, acute, causative disease process is located in the urinary bladder. If this is so, then treatment of the bladder infection should improve the patient’s mental status. Each member of the human body, just as the Body of Christ, is connected to all other members. The other members suffer when another member is suffering.

Is there a blood test that can demonstrate derangement of brain chemistry in the setting of bladder infection? No. Not yet. The point is that the scripture tells us the essential facts of this story without requiring complicated tests so that even a child can understand them. That is God.

This principle, which might be called the geriatric principle of synergy, is very useful in the care of elderly patients with chronic disease. In the case of an elderly person with Alzheimer’s disease, almost any dysfunction of an organ outside of the brain will cause the brain to suffer; and treatment of that dysfunction will result in the brain rejoicing.

Another way to put it is that the brain which is suffering from Alzheimer’s disease is more sensitive to organ dysfunction in any other part of the body. This is why we may see elderly patients with Alzheimer’s disease becoming confused when they have a myocardial infarction, pneumonia, or fecal impaction. It is almost as if the brain serves as a barometer of overall bodily health in these patients. When the brain is suffering, it is wise to make sure the brain itself is not the organ with the acute illness- from an acute stroke, for example- but it is also an alert to look for another organ system, besides the brain which is decompensating. Scripture tells us so.