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# Detective medicine

## Carolyn Walker helps patients discover the true source of their medical problems

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Carolyn Walker, of Prevention & Healing of Iowa, is a nurse practitioner who specializes in functional medicine. She helps patients find the root causes of their illnesses through evaluating the body's chemistry rather than treating symptoms solely with standard drug therapy. / Justin Hayworth/Q

Written by ESTELA VILLANUEVA-WHITMAN Special to Q

Carolyn Walker spent years trying to determine what was making her feel so bad, until clues from her health history revealed the source of her medical problems.

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In her case, metal toxicity was the underlying cause of a hormone imbalance.

Today, she helps patients make similar discoveries. A family nurse practitioner who specializes in functional medicine at Prevention & Healing of Iowa in Urbandale, Walker investigates the root causes of health problems, particularly nutrient and hormone imbalance.

Functional medicine evaluates the body's chemistry and restores function with missing nutrients rather than treating symptoms solely with standard drug

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therapy. It's a process of detective work, looking at the function of the body with a spy glass, she explained.

"I want to know the three most bothersome symptoms of patients, and I want to know when they started. What all was happening at that point in their lives," she said.

Patients who are doctor- hopping, not finding the answers they need to feel better, could benefit from the approach.

Walker's own experience sparked her interest in the field.

Decade by decade, her health worsened. She experienced painful fibrocystic breasts, heavy menstrual bleeding, hair loss, weight gain and difficulty sleeping. Half of her thyroid was removed and drug therapy was not working, so she investigated other options, including bio-identical hormone replacement therapy, for patients who cannot tolerate commercial hormones.

When her current physician wouldn't measure her hormones, she found a provider who did and found relief. She continued to research the topic while studying at the University of Iowa and developed a community education class on bio-identical hormones, which she has co-instructed for 13 years. Some of those students have since become patients.

Walker finally leaned why her thyroid and ovaries weren't working when she and her son were diagnosed with heavy metal toxicity.

Her son, who experienced a lifetime of focus and concentration problems, became depressed in college, so she performed a nutritional profile to investigate. The test happened to show high levels of aluminum and mercury. Walker recalled her son crying inconsolably following vaccinations when he was 4 months old. At the time, mercury was used as a preservative.

After visiting a doctor in St. Louis who specializes in heavy metals, her son began detoxification to correct the problem. Walker was also tested and became a patient as well.

Walker predicts that in a few years, such testing will be as common as cholesterol tests.

Her office in Urbandale, which she shares with certified master herbalist Marty Rhea, offers aqua detox foot baths and far infrared sauna and herbs to help with detoxification. But toxicity is just one area Walker addresses.

"I think patients get a more comprehensive look at their health here. I look deeper into more things and do a lot of labs," Walker

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said.

Shirley Poertner of West Des Moines has been a patient for five years. She searched for a specialist to assist her with a hormone imbalance and has appreciated the additional testing and education Walker provides. Poertner continues to see a traditional physician for routine care, but said Walker helped her maintain her quality of life.

"I just don't think my regular physician has the depth of knowledge around nutrition and biochemistry that Carolyn has. I'm fortunate that I'm in a position where I can look to both of them," she said.

Patients' first two visits run 90 to 120 minutes long. Much of that is teaching and discussion of medical history and biochemical pathways, so Walker sees three or four patients per day, compared to 20 or 30 in a traditional setting.

At follow-up visits, she'll explain the evidence that hasn't been tested previously. Patients may be seen three to four times the first year if they respond well, and then once per year after that.

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