

Conversations with Sara Gottfried, MD

Interview by Dick Benson

Sara Gottfried, MD, is the three-time New York Times bestselling author of The Hormone Cure, The Hormone Reset Diet, Younger and her latest book, Brain Body Diet. After graduating from Harvard Medical School and MIT, Dr. Gottfried completed her residency at the University of California at San Francisco. She is a board-certified gynecologist who teaches natural hormone balancing in her novel online programs so that women can lose weight, detoxify, and slow down aging. Dr. Gottfried lives in Berkeley, CA with her husband and two daughters.

Integrative Medicine: A Clinician's Journal (IMCJ):

You graduated from Harvard Medical School and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and completed a residency at the University of California at San Francisco. All very traditional. How did your education impact the development of how you practiced medicine?

Dr Gottfried: At Harvard, the highest priority was placed on the most rapidly advancing fields, like genomics, molecular biology, and immunology. Specialties – including cardiology, oncology, and hepatology – were more valued than pediatrics or psychiatry. Nutrition and lifestyle medicine were relegated to a 30-minute mention after the “hard science” was fully covered. This was 30 years ago, but little has changed. Yet the logic never made sense to me. Why were drugs, which are forms of molecular therapy, considered more valuable and worthy of study than food, another form of molecular therapy?

After hitting a wall in my thirties and experiencing burnout, I changed my mindset. I now believe lifestyle factors to be essential and non-negotiable aspects of health: regular sleep; access to organic, whole, nutrient-dense, and colorful foods, mindfully eaten; contemplative practice; social connection, enriched by purpose and meaning; and regular movement.

After my residency, I began my career within the traditional healthcare setting, seeing up to 30 patients a day. A patient visit was limited to seven minutes, which did not allow for getting a holistic view of the patient; hence, the visit boiled down to a brief overview of test

results and the writing of prescriptions. It was an environment of high stress and burnout.

I tried to change this broken system from within but ultimately chose to leave and found my own integrative and Functional Medicine clinic, both for my patients' wellbeing and my own.

IMCJ: You have taught healthcare professionals—including medical, naturopathic, osteopathic and chiropractic physicians, as well as acupuncturists, nutritionists and health coaches—methods focused on rebalancing hormones and advancing healthspan of their patients. How does a Harvard-educated MD interact with this wide variety of practitioners?

Dr Gottfried: I've always been committed to a collaborative and inclusive model. Transformation of healthcare won't occur if I only teach physicians. Presently, only about 2 percent of medical doctors are pursuing an integrative and functional approach. We need at least 13 to 15 percent to begin market transformation. What unites us is our common goal of putting the patient at the center and our desire to provide the best possible outcomes for our patients.

IMCJ: It has been stated that you practice evidence-based integrative, precision, and functional medicine. What does that mean?

Dr Gottfried: In 1993, one of my mentors at Harvard, David Eisenberg, MD, published a landmark study in the *New England Journal of Medicine* showing that one in three US citizens used “unconventional” medicine. At the time, traditional physicians believed that complementary and alternative medicine was unproven and disproven. Unfortunately, many US physicians still hold this belief about integrative and Functional Medicine, despite thousands of published peer-reviewed studies to the contrary.

I don't blame conventional physicians for their skepticism. I simply ask that the same evidential standard be applied across the board, whether the topic is a new

molecule for cancer or a natural ingredient or dietary approach to reverse insulin resistance. Fortunately, there are many academic and private institutions building out the evidence base, such as the Thomas Jefferson University's new Department of Integrative Medicine and Nutritional Sciences, led by Daniel Monti, MD; the University of Arizona Andrew Weil Center for Integrative Medicine; the Center for Functional Medicine at the Cleveland Clinic under the leadership of Mark Hyman, MD; and even the Precision Health and Integrated Diagnostics Center at Stanford University.

From Dr. Eisenberg's course, I continued to integrate conventional and unconventional medicine, including listening to Dr. Jeffrey Bland's cassette tapes back in 1994 about nutritional biochemistry. He cofounded the Institute for Functional Medicine, where I received continuing education, along with courses from the University of Arizona, American Academy of Anti-Aging Medicine, and Academy of Integrative Health and Medicine.

I take care of patients in a way that addresses underlying nutritional deficiencies and excesses, loss of homeostasis, and other dysfunctions. I look at how we might optimize the interaction of our genes with lifestyle and other environmental factors. A pharmaceutical medication may be the most effective option, but it often isn't. Food can be used as medicine in a condition-specific way, while herbal and micronutrient supplements are used to address specific support needs. By incorporating lifestyle medicine, nutrition, supplements, stress reduction, and appropriate exercise, practitioners and patients work together to improve the functioning of the body as a whole, creating sustained and measurable health.

IMCJ: How have you seen medicine, especially integrative and functional medicine, evolve during your career?

Dr Gottfried: Our current healthcare system is broken. As chronic disease reaches epidemic proportions, the standard model does not meet the needs of the average patient. Certainly you can witness this model in our rising epidemic of obesity, breast cancer, and Alzheimer's disease, among others.

Second, our doctors and nurses are burned out. More doctors are choosing to create their own Functional Medicine/integrative practices to allow themselves to spend more time with their patients to improve their outcomes.

Finally, with access to high-quality medical information online, patients are more educated and have access to trackers from heart rate variability to sleep monitors, which is crucial since 99 percent of health management now occurs outside the doctor's office.

IMCJ: You have been at Metagenics for about six months. How has this impacted your opinions concerning nutritional applications in medicine?

Dr Gottfried: For many years now, I have practiced a food-first philosophy. In my medical office, I saw firsthand how making diet and lifestyle changes helped patients reclaim their lives. My opinions are unchanged since

becoming the Chief Medical Officer: We continue to need the best evidence for how to quantify and measurably change health for our patients. As a physician scientist, that starts with robust research and rigorous practitioner education.

IMCJ: One of the objectives you were assigned at Metagenics is to drive overall education and practitioner outreach strategy and provide insights on emerging areas of clinical interest. What have you done in this area?

Dr Gottfried: Our focus is to meet the evolving needs of modern practitioners with education. After I took over the position as Chief Medical Officer last year, I embarked on



Photo by Abigail Huller

an educational speaking tour that will continue indefinitely in multiple cities across 10 US states, as well as keynote speeches in South Africa, Taiwan, and United Arab Emirates. The content I teach is science-based and unbranded. Additionally, we offer livestreaming of select seminars to reach a wider base of practitioners. We are launching several online courses for practitioners this year and in 2020.

IMCJ: Your new book, *Body Brain Diet*, focuses on lifestyle changes. How do you convince practitioners that health solutions are not always a pill, and how do they explain that to patients?

Dr Gottfried: Doctors prescribe pills not only because they are short on time. Pharmaceuticals are often backed by rigorous research that allows doctors to feel confident in their recommendations. Most physicians lack competencies to counsel patients about nutrition and lifestyle medicine. Less than half of physicians feel equipped to counsel patients about obesity. We need a robust education strategy to make up for holes in physician education with regard to diet, exercise, and other environmental levers, based on rigorous research, so that a doctor can feel confident in making nutritional supplement or lifestyle recommendations. What this means for the nutrition and dietary supplement space is that we need to have the best science available to prove the case, and we need to teach practitioners how to translate that science into action.

IMCJ: For many years you focused on hormones and their impact on health, but your new book, *Brain Body Diet*, is less focused on hormones. Why is that?

Dr Gottfried: In 2015, I fell and was diagnosed with a severe concussion. It was terrifying but also life-changing. Before I fainted, I knew little about the importance of the brain in repairing the body. Thus began my quest to understand the central role of the brain in healing the body.

What I discovered radically altered my understanding of how to heal the human body. It turns out that when you take care of your brain body, you're actually taking care of all the systems in your body: body weight, anxiety, depression, addictive tendencies, sex drive, circulation, gastrointestinal and immune systems, and the endocrine system. Repairing the brain resolves so many health issues, from the mundane to the life-threatening.

The definition of a healthy brain body is that your brain and body are in sync. Your gut is having a healing conversation with your brain, and your heart is telling your brain's overactive stress-response system that it can calm down. In short, having a healthy brain body means you are clear of the inflammation that causes brain/body breakdown.

IMCJ: Talk about your new book *Brain Body Diet*.

Dr Gottfried: Most of us don't really pay attention to our bodies. We believe the brain is in charge, controlling every aspect of our body, health, daily functions. But there is an interdependent relationship between the brain and the body, mutually dependent and mutually supporting. Understanding this brain body connection holds the key to reversing many chronic symptoms.

The "diet" of *Brain Body Diet* harkens back to the Greek meaning of diet as a "way of life," so the protocol extends beyond creating new habits with food to the way that you direct your thoughts, sleep, and supplement—in order to establish a new set point for homeostasis.

What I highlight in the book is that the female brain body is different from the male. I delve into how we heal the major issues I see my female patients struggling with in their 40s and 50s: weight gain, brain fog, memory loss, addictive tendencies, anxiety and depression.

IMCJ: Where do you see healthcare going in our country?

Dr Gottfried: Over the past 25 years, we've witnessed a dramatic rise in chronic, debilitating conditions like diabetes, Alzheimer's disease, depression, and autoimmune dysfunction. Chronic illness is the result of diverse factors that must be treated in a cohesive, scientifically validated approach. Addressing individual symptoms through pharmacological agents alone does not work. This is why I believe the traditional healthcare model is failing. Conventional medicine needs to change.

When you look at the economics of healthcare costs—3.3 trillion dollars and rising in the United States—you find that at least 70 percent of costs are due to problems of lifestyle. If the largest part of healthcare costs is being spent on preventable diseases caused by lifestyle, it clearly indicates that we need a new model of medicine that addresses the new challenges we face and replaces the unsustainable and broken conventional medical care system.

I believe the transformation needs to happen at the practitioner level, but also from citizens demanding a better way to deal with their chronic health issues. Top down and bottom up in order to create the revolution that we all need.