



On Wellness and Happiness

General Session: Panel

Wednesday, June 6th 2012 2:30pm - 3:15pm

McNulty Gathering Room, Doerr-Hosier Center, The Aspen Institute

Speaker: Overview (via video):

Dr. Andrew Weil, Best-Selling Author, Speaker and Integrative Medicine Thought-Leader, U.S.

Transcription:

Taylor Gannon, Assistant Marketing Coordinator, Global Spa & Wellness Summit

ANDREW WEIL: Hello I'm Dr. Weil, director of integrative health and wellness at Miraval. I want to welcome you to the 6th annual Global Spa & Wellness Summit in Aspen, Colorado. Innovation through Imagination is a perfect theme. It applies to healthcare in this country especially wellness. Thank you for inviting me to be a part of this important occasion.

QUESTION: With its vast amount of medical research, impressive medical technology, and strong health education, why is the US not "healthier?"

ANDREW WEIL: The United States spends more per capita on healthcare than any other country in the world, by a long shot. We are now spending upwards of 16% on GDP and it could go as high as 20%. It is completely unsustainable. At the same time we have poorer health outcomes than any other country, any way you look at it: in terms of infant mortality, longevity, rates of chronic disease, and so forth. The big question is: Why are we not healthier if we are spending too much money on our health?

My feeling is that the root cause of our problem is that this vast enterprise, which is what we call healthcare, is actually a disease management system that is not working very well. We are spending all this money to manage existing disease, most of which is lifestyle related and therefore preventable. We have to ask ourselves, why we can't do a better job with prevention and health promotion. The answer – simply – is that they don't pay and, until we can figure out how to make them pay, we are not going to change this system.

The other reason why our medicine and health care is so expensive is because we are completely reliant on technology to solve all of our problems. That includes pharmaceutical drugs. And technology is very expensive. Our health professionals are not trained in low cost, low tech ways of managing common ailments.

QUESTION: What is the future of wellness and what role can the spa industry have in shaping it?

ANDREW WEIL: Our healthcare of the future has to be based on wellness and health promotion. I think the spa industry can be very central in this new kind of healthcare because wellness, health promotion, and healthy living have always been central in spas. I would think that the spa industry could be a good source of inspiration for designing a new kind of healthcare.

QUESTION: Do you feel we are moving in the right direction?

ANDREW WEIL: I'm afraid we are not moving in the right direction at the moment. The problem is that, as dysfunctional as our healthcare promotion is, it is generating rivers of money that are flowing into very few pockets. Those are the pockets of the pharmaceutical industry, the manufacturers of medical devices, and the big insurers. Those vested interests have total control over our legislators. It doesn't matter whether they are democrats or republicans, and for that reason I don't think we can expect change from the government. Those vested interests don't want anything to change. I think the only hope is through education, raising awareness, and a grassroots movement that changes the political balance of power. Again, I think spas could help promote that grassroots movement by educating people about the importance of wellness, health promotion, and prevention.

QUESTION: Do you think happiness is important to our health? Is it related to self-esteem?

ANDREW WEIL: I'm not sure happiness is the goal of life. I think we should be open to the possibility of happiness but, it seems to me, it's much better to work towards contentment. Contentment is an inner feeling of things being fulfilled that are relatively independent of external circumstances. Most people imagine they'll be happy if they get something they don't have and I don't think that's the best way to think. I think when you're healthy, a part of health is a feeling of wellbeing, and I don't know if that's the same as happiness. I think a sense of wellbeing is definitely an important quality of health.

QUESTION: What message should the spa community endorse to help people realize their full health potential?

ANDREW WEIL: I think the spa community really should be working to educate people about the principles of healthy lifestyle. And they should be working on getting the people that it touches to be agents of change in our society. I think people that come through spas should leave knowing more than they went in about how to take care of themselves, how to lead healthy lives, and how to inspire others to do so.