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Cover

This image is from an anonymous painter of the Song dynasty, and is entitled *Eye Medicine*.



Our Yang Sheng correspondent Xiaoyao Xingzhe forwarded this picture of his last job, doing the work of six men.

Play now, pay later ... another modern disease

T IS A STANDARD ASSUMPTION FOR US, part of our worldview in Chinese medicine, that the part reflects the whole. Enough reflections from different parts, and we have a pretty good idea of what the whole is doing. The whole can be an organ in the body, the whole body, or even the body of society.

Increasingly over a number of years, a certain scenario has been recurring. Patients, especially those working for large firms, have been becoming more and more run-down, exhausted, burnt out. Treatment helps, but before long it is obvious that it is all being poured back into the job, and that "treatment" has become "maintenance". Soon even that is slipping. Things continue to slide downhill until they finally and reluctantly quit the job, and then they gradually recover their health, and are much happier as well.

Now people in modern societies generally work harder than is necessary or good for them, but this has gone far beyond that. There is something different going on. Here is the story we hear, again and again:

The Lantern is a journal of Chinese medicine and its related fields, with an emphasis on the traditional view and its relevance to clinic. Our aim is to encourage access to the vast resources in this tradition of preserving, maintaining and restoring health, whether this be via translations of works of past centuries or observations from our own generation working with these techniques, with their undeniable variability. The techniques are many, but the traditional perspective of the human as an integral part, indeed a reflection, of the social, meteorological and cosmic matrix remains one. We wish to foster that view.

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They have laid off 20 per cent (or 30 per cent or 40 per cent) of the other workers in my section, and not replaced them. I and the others remaining are expected to take up the slack. When we complain, we are told that the ones fired were 'deadwood', 'superfluous', 'non-essential staff', and that if we don't like it we can follow them. In fact the 'superfluous' staff provided crucial support functions for others on our team who may have been more visible achievers. Now I am left trying to do almost two full jobs, in the time, and for the pay, of one. My manager tells me he understands it is difficult, but it is only temporary, and he will try to find someone as soon as possible. But it has already been three (or six, or nine, or 12) months and nothing has changed. I am utterly exhausted, and becoming sick more and more often. Can you help?

Well, of course we can help. We have herbs to provide energy and support immunity, acupuncture to calm and restore a modicum of balance – but this is not a cure when it is the culture that is diseased.

But what changed in the culture, to make it this way? It was puzzling for a long time. There has been no shortage of people willing to work, so why not hire them? Why make your best workers do the job of two people, when this obviously detracts from the quality of work they are able to provide to the company? Furthermore, by burning them out to the point where they are forced to quit, isn't this damaging to the company itself due to the loss of skill and experience?

The only conclusion was that the company did not care, or at least that someone in the company did not care. Gradually, the mechanism of pathology causing this disorder became clear. It benefits someone to have less workers, because that means less expense, and big savings, very quickly. The long term damage will only show up much later, when that someone obviously plans to be gone. Therefore they must be on a short-term contract.

And that is the agent of disease, here. In the cut and run culture of short-term employment positions for managers and heads of companies, it only makes sense to improve the bottom line as quickly as possible, because that is what you will show to the next employer when you move on in two or three years: "Look how quickly I boosted the retained earnings for my section at my last job! You should pay me big."

It is very much like a stimulant drug, that seems to give you energy but in fact simply drains your deep reserves, so that you play now, but pay later.

Interestingly, like the human body, society has a way of restoring balance. For example, a similar scenario has already played itself out in the BBC. A shift to fragmented short-term contract employment was adopted in the '90s, but this had unforeseen consequences: the level of creativity and program quality declined.

As freelance status became common among program-makers, it became plain that they had little incentive to contribute ideas to the corporation. Ideas were their means of attracting another commission and thereby employment. Ideas were withheld.¹

As a consequence the BBC has gone back to longer-term employment in order to foster and retain key talent.

In Chinese medicine, we are taught to look for patterns, for trends; to predict how a course of disease is going to develop, and to keep our eye on the whole organism, including how harmoniously (or not) it relates to its environment. When we see problems, we design an intervention that aims to assist the organism back toward balance.

This editorial is such an intervention. If you find yourself hearing the same story recounted above, make a photocopy of this editorial for them. Ask them to read it and take it to work, and even better, arrange for it to fall into the hands of their manager's boss, who hopefully is not on a short-term contract.

And perhaps it will live up to the promise of Ye Tian-Shi's treatment axiom:

A light intervention can eliminate a deep-seated problem.

1. Born, G. (2004). *Uncertain Vision: Birt, Dyke and the Reinvention of the BBC*. London: Secker and Warburg, p 191.

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