From the Front Lines to Functional Freedom: Dr. Julia Ward's Journey to Root-Cause Medicine Transcript

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Introduction to Functional Medicine

Functional medicine is finding the root cause of something like high blood pressure or high blood sugar and treating that instead of giving you a drug to treat the symptom.

So if you have all of a sudden your blood sugar is inching up and your hemoglobin A1c is going up and your doctor's like, well, you're pre-diabetic or you're getting into this metabolic syndrome.

they're going to give you a drug, probably metformin. And whereas the functional medicine approach is, well, hey, maybe if you start doing a little more exercise and let's take a look at your diet, let's get rid of some of those processed foods and sugars, then we can reverse that.

Then you don't need a drug. And now you're going to be healthier in general for the rest of your life. This is Doctor Talks, real talk from real doctors on the issues that matter to you most.

Hey everybody. Thanks again for joining us on the My MD Unscripted podcast. I am in Texas, but if you're outside of the state, we don't always wear cowboy hats all the time.

It's Western day at my office. My staff decided I should be in a hat. I kept it on just for you. Today's going to be a fun episode. We're honored to be joined by Dr.

Julia Ward. She's got a great practice doing some really great things. You know, Julia, you started in the Navy and then worked urgent care and emergency care and then somehow pivoted to functional medicine.

What was the moment that made you say there has to be a better way? Okay. Well, thank you for having me. I'm really honored to be here. I was doing urgent care and emergency room medicine and just getting completely burnt out of just the repetitiveness and just feeling like I'm not making much of a difference.

And there really wasn't time to educate people about better ways to kind of improve their health. And I Honestly, it was my own health that kind of got my attention.

Dr. Ward's Path to Functional Medicine

I was feeling chronically fatigued and run down at the time. I was about like 45 at the time. And now granted, I have five kids, so I'm rating you five kids and I'm working full time.

I was going to say, I think that's the normal state. You're working in the ER full time and you've got five kids and you're tired. Yeah, and I was tired to the point where I was falling asleep driving to work in the morning.

I knew something was wrong. I wasn't having hot flashes or night sweats. That wasn't a part of my change, but I knew something was changing. And when I went to my GYN, I just really wasn't getting any satisfactory answers.

And I could tell from her response that she didn't know anything about bioidentical hormones either. And I'd kind of heard about these, but I didn't know much about them because of course we're not taught anything in matter of bioidentical.

Even though my internship was in OBGYN, like there was no mention of hormones, you know, like bioidentical hormones was not part of the vernacular at all.

So I started researching that and that's when I stumbled onto functional medicine and started taking courses through A4M, which is one of the big organizations that teaches functional medicine in the country.

And really just kind of, it really rekindled my passion for medicine because here was a way of getting to the root cause of what was going on and treating it instead of just giving you a drug to treat a symptom, which, okay, now you have to take that drug for the rest of your life.

Functional medicine just made so much more sense logistically. Like, yeah, let's find out what's going on. Why is this happening? And so, you know, there's the other thing I love about functional medicine is that there's so many little, what I call rabbit holes that you can go down.

There's some little like mini specialties within it. And so, I mean, I really personally love learning. That's my favorite thing to do. And there's just an endless amount of things that you can.

So I started with bioidentical hormones, started doing that, and then started realizing, okay, well, gut health, that, It's a huge influence on our overall health.

Right. Then, you know, I started learning about ozone therapy and that was really amazing because I had never even heard of ozone until maybe, you know, seven, eight years ago.

And again, something that's not taught in medical school. Oh, there's so much. You know, before we get too far down too many of the rabbit holes, you went from the ER, which is nobody's special.

Everybody's the same. You're either dying or you're not move on through treat them and street them to individualized personalized care. I can say you think that I had the same story in my first venture was into biochemical hormones outside, you know, above my outside the box stuff.

But what is functional medicine really like before we get for, you know, some of our listeners may not be that familiar with that. You know, it's kind of a buzzword, but what do you, what does functional medicine even really mean?

To me, functional medicine is finding the root cause of something like high blood pressure or high blood sugar and treating that instead of giving you a drug to treat the symptoms.

So if you have all of a sudden your blood sugar is inching up and your hemoglobin A1c is going up and your doctor's like, well, you're pre-diabetic or you're getting into this metabolic syndrome.

they're going to give you a drug, probably metformin. And whereas the functional medicine approach is, well, hey, maybe if you start doing a little more exercise and let's take a look at your diet, let's get rid of some of those processed foods and sugars, you know, then we can reverse that.

Then you don't need a drug. And now you're going to be healthier in general for the rest of your life. And you know, I would say that my completely in the box hospital based practice colleagues would say, well, yeah, but nobody does that.

That doesn't really work. So I have to give them a medicine because they really just want to sit there and eat their pizza and watch movies all night long.

I feel like that's an excuse that the doctors use because they don't have the time to sit down and explain this, you know, because they're only given 10 to 15 minutes per patient to see them.

And so no, you don't have time for education, you know? And so I think the perception then becomes, well, they're just not interested or they're just not going to do it.

What Functional Medicine Means

But, but I truly do believe that most people are very invested in their own health and they're looking for better ways to treat themselves. And the tests that, you know, my, my, my colleagues that get paid through insurance only the tests they have to get deeper into the, to the health problem, some more closer to the roots than the fruit of the problem.

They don't have that many tests. What are some of the things that you like the most since you got into functional medicine? What are some of your favorite tests that make some of the biggest difference in your patients?

Wow. There are so many fun functional medicine tests and it's sort of like, in a way, it's sort of like supplements. You can overtest, you can oversupplement.

The art of it is finding which is going to give you the most bang for your buck. Correct. Right. So I guess some of the basic functional medicine tests would be like a stool test.

or looking at your gut microbiome. And that does a whole DNA analysis of the gut microbiome because we have to have certain species of bacteria for generalized health.

And that's a really good look at just basic health. And especially if you're having digestive issues, that's a good one to start with. we do a lot of food allergy and sensitivity testing sometimes people can be eating a very healthy diet but maybe they're having a huge inflammatory reaction to something like egg whites or almonds not even know it this actually just happened recently we did the food allergy test on my husband and we're both into bodybuilding you know so we eat a lot of egg whites a lot of chicken And we got his result back and he was off the chart high for a true allergy and a true sensitivity to edge whites.

So, you know, that was causing a lot of inflammation. And so when he stopped eating edge whites, it's like, okay, I feel better. I love it when that happens.

We have a similar test and it's like, look at all these things that, you know, they think they can never eat any of this stuff again. I'm like, all right, easy, easy.

You know, you probably have some, probably have some increased gut permeability. Some of these things are positive because that's what you eat every day.

Let's avoid the big guns. Let's do a little, you know, avoidance and then we'll come back around, do some retest or do some, you know, reenter some foods into your life and see what happens.

It can be, sometimes you can pull it up and it's just red everywhere because their immune system is freaking out about almost everything they eat. Right.

And then you definitely, if somebody has a lot of foods that they're lighting up to, then that means they've got a very leaky gut. And we do have a test specific just for intestinal permeability.

And it's looking at a number of markers like zonulin. There's some other things that it looks at very specifically, but I do like the food allergy test because I can tell if you have leaky gut just from how many foods are lighting up.

Right. You know, or some sort of yeast overgrowth or, you know, some of these other, you know, SIBO or some of that. It's, it's just so crazy. You know, I have weight loss is a big deal.

You know, when you walk alongside people, the way that we do with longer visits and more attention, you know, everybody has these goals they're trying to meet.

And it's like, well, of course you're not losing weight. Your whole body is so angry. To eat enough calories to lose weight, you'd go into starvation mode.

There's nothing in between. You've got to calm down your dietary anger.

your immune system is angry so and they feel so much better and they start losing weight now they are ready to do a little extra it's just this cycle i feel like crap every time i eat i feel worse i don't feel like exercise and of course they can't lose weight even if they cut back a little on their calories right it's so rewarding you know you know lifestyle habits I think, you know, one thing that with functional medicine that, you know, I'm not functionally medicine trained, but I'm, you know, I'm, I'm functional friendly and my partners are, and you know, they just go, they'll start talking and I'll just get lost in the biochemistry.

I just started getting like, you know, glazed over eyes. I'm like, oh, biochem. So I thought I would never have to say these words again, but I think it just, it, it, it argues to the science based nature of this because it's.

Yeah. From the outside looking in it looks fluffy and these how come my regular doctor doesn't have a food sensitivity study and how come you know, you know, they just, it just looks, we don't use, you know, we use a lot of supplements.

Well, it just looks sort of anti-medicine, but it's not. And it's interesting because the, the insurance companies who would traditionally pay for food allergy testing only recognized IgE as a, as a food allergy testing.

They didn't look at the IgG and that was like back in the 1980s, maybe that was okay. But now we've got better technology, but the insurance companies don't want to pay for these more advanced tests because it, you know, they don't want to spend the money.

You know, then you're going to, then there's going to be more money they have to spend down the line. But really it's not true. If they would pay for this test and the patient saw how to eat differently and feel better.

I mean, our experience is the patients get healthier and spend less money with their insurance company. You know? I will tell you that I do have a lab that I'll pass on to you, but they will use insurance to do that food allergy test.

Oh, that's funny. Well, it doesn't help me much. We don't like insurance companies much around here. My patients often do have insurance, so I'll take it just in case that would save them some money because I'm all about saving people money.

Yeah. We're in the same boat. We don't take insurance, but we will use it for lab whenever possible. Yeah. We'll let the lab build them. Yeah, exactly.

The lab builds it. And so when, when this company approached me and they said, we do this food allergy testing and it's the same one, the same, you know, things, IgE, IgG, compliment, IgG4 for a list of a bunch of foods and they use your insurance.

I'm like, great, we'll do that. You know, because it saves people money. Yeah, I like that. I love that. Yeah. Well, okay. Couple other tests that I love doing that are fairly new on the market.

And one is the glyco check test. Yeah. And this is a non-invasive way of measuring your vascular health or your microvascular health, I should say. So we could spend a whole nother lecture on this test, but that's a really cool test.

And then I've started using genomics or DNA testing for people. That's been really helpful too. We were talking before we started recording about the glycotech test and just videos of seeing the capillary beds being sparse and thin and weak just from all the damage they've gotten from basically all the other things we're talking about with inflammatory diets and sugar and blood pressure and all the things.

And then, you know, starting on the proper supplements and some lifestyle modifications, you can retest them and see that their capillary beds are coming back and they're feeling better.

And you get a before and after test score that shows the progress because, you know, these patients, you ask them to take certain number of supplements that the dollar amount adds up each, you know, it's not crazy, but it adds up and they want to know that it's doing something and you can only take You only spend so much money on supplements in pure faith for so long.

So it's great having a before and after that's showing that it's working. I think that's just a super sexy test. Tell me about women's health in your practice.

I guess most doctors offices, unless you specialize in men, are the majority women because women are smarter than men and they go to doctors for their health.

That's clear. Married men live longer than single men for a reason. How do you help women reclaim sort of control over their own healthcare and how is that going in your practice?

Yeah, I primarily started with women and, you know, looking at hormonal health, making sure our hormones are balanced. And, you know, there's different ways we can give back bioidentical hormones.

Specifically, you know, we don't want to take estrogen or testosterone in a pill form because that's going to cause liver inflammation, high blood pressure, weight gain, you know, all sorts of bad side effects.

Plus it's just not as effective. So you can do a cream delivery method where you're putting hormonal cream on your external skin a couple times a day.

You can do a vaginal cream at night, you know, because it absorbs a little quicker. Or you can do pellet therapy and pellets are compressed pieces of testosterone.

They look like little grains of rice. They get inserted under the, you know, skin between the skin and the muscle and in the flank area. And those are honestly it's my favorite way because with the testosterone pellet you don't have to remember to do anything it's just and it's a nice timed release of hormone it's a nice steady state of hormone release you can accurately follow the blood or plasma levels when you're doing a cream delivery method it doesn't show up in the blood with any kind of accuracy you've really got to do either a saliva test or a dry urine test.

It's just an extra step, whereas the pellet is just, I can get somebody balanced on hormones much quicker. And in general, and just from my own personal experience, when I started going down this road and fatigue was my number one issue, and I'd eat creams on myself for about a year, I couldn't tell if I was on or off.

Now granted, sometimes I'd forget to put them on because it's like- It's part of the problem. Yeah. It's part of the problem. But when I got my first set of pellets, It was night and day different, you know, like all of a sudden, like about a week after I had the pellet, I was no longer planning my nap for the day.

You know, I was no longer deciding like how much, you know, I was on major energy conservation mode, you know, and that just, all of a sudden I just felt more like my normal self.

Yeah, we give a very similar spill, creams, trokies, oral dissolving trokies, you know, there's other ways to do it. As a control freak, doctor person, I like the pellets because I can tell you what, that your dose is right.

You know, there's a lot of reasons to be tired.

Women's Hormone Health and Pellet Therapy

There's a lot of reasons for, you know, a lot of the brain fog, you know, anxiety, depression, low libido, you know. and it's like well okay your testosterone and your estrogen and your fsh are all looking great let's dig deeper tell me about you know you got some low libido tell me about your relationship with your spouse you know what's going on here you know are you getting any exercise and then the other thing i like about pellets is They're blood flow dependent.

So when you are exercising and you're, you know, whatever you, and you, or you're stressed and you need more, you get more because your heart rate kicks in and there you go.

Um, the only caveat there is don't work out right before you come to give me your peak or trough blood level, because you're going to have spiked it with your increased heart rate for a minute.

But when did you start doing a podcast? You have your own podcast called the functional edge. And what inspired that? I wanted a way to kind of just get more information out.

And I'm just naturally curious about a lot of things. So when I thought about doing a podcast, I'm like, oh, it's a way for me to interview some interesting people, get some more information.

And so I really just have been doing it since January and it's been a lot of fun. I agree. I've been doing it even less and it's just, it's fun. I learn so much every time.

I mean, I'm interviewing half of the interviews I've done so far, like people that work for me and it's still learning all the time. So it's, it's really fun.

So I, yeah. And you know, having you on, I learned about glycose check and, and, you know, you know, more functional things right up, you know, today.

It's so great. So you mentioned that you're a mom of five kids. How has that, you know, tell me about your practice style. Tell me about your, how you're able to balance all of that.

Well, I started my practice about 10 years ago. I certainly had to wait till the kids were, you know, kind of grown and in high school and college before.

Right on. You're smarter than me. Yeah. I could not have done this when the kids were little and I'm still taking them around to all these different activities.

Once they're driving and they're more independent and you know, we're kind of good, then you can put your time and effort into. the practice and it does take a lot of time and energy.

There's about five kids, man. I have three kids and we started this 10 years ago. So my kids were like eight, seven, and four. But my wife is a PA. She works here.

I work here. We both had separate jobs to pay the bills while we were starting this practice. And still just kind of, but it was like, I mean, if the only alternative is working in the system, you know, getting more and more depressed and miserable every day, then I guess we can do that.

We look back and we have no idea how it all, how we did it all. You know, we didn't do it on our own. We had help, but it's a, it's a, it's a minor miracle, but having a practice that we could long personalized visits and then block a time to go do something and come back and really lean into our people a hundred percent.

Instead of just trying to knock out 50 people a day, that really helps. When you're doing quality, not quantity, that sort of makes the biggest difference.

And it helped for us to move to more of a membership model. The water is great. Come on in. Yeah. Yeah. It definitely, it's more conducive to this type of practice where you're spending more time.

I don't necessarily want to be nickel and diming people like, oh, I spent an hour with you today and two hours the next day. You know, it's just, I don't want to be charging them per hour.

I just want one fee that just covers my time. And then the rest is whatever tests we're ordering or supplements or And once you remember at my practice, everything else is mostly at my cost or a little cost plus, other than the big

extras.

There's no disincentive to come in to see me. You've already paid for my time. There's no reason you shouldn't call me if you think you might need to call me.

If I needed to call a lawyer over something, I'd be like, oh my gosh, is this worth them charging me? you know in 30 minute increments at five million dollars an hour you know like no thank you no no it's you know you've bought my time you need stitches 45 dollars you want you know a blood count five dollars you need some supplements cost plus you know so It's just so, and in the end we say, you know, people are paying us out of pocket on top of their insurance, if they have insurance, and they still save money.

Because every time they need their insurance, it costs them anyway. So by, you know, protecting them from unnecessary overcharges in the system, it's a game changer for them.

And even if it wasn't, the level of care that our patients have come to expect and appreciate, you just can't get it in a 15 minute visit, you know? Yeah, absolutely.

Well, okay. Let's not drag it out too long. It's awesome. I want to do a few questions. I'm going to give you a multiple choice that how you want to answer this one.

Podcasting, Practice Style, and Membership Care

Is there a book or resource that you recommend to every patient or is there a supplement that you think most people overlook or is there like a non-negotiable health practice that you have all of your patients do?

Is there something in that field that we could all learn from today? Okay. As far as a resource, I guess it depends on what it is they're dealing with.

One of the things I've been learning about lately, over the past couple of years, I've started really learning about mold, mycotoxin illness, and Lyme disease.

And one of the things that I've recognized is that it's a very complex inflammatory kind of illnesses, all of those things. And a lot of times people's nervous system kind of gets hijacked with process.

because your body's constantly under attack. You start, and that affects how you intake, you know, just normal stimuli. And so sometimes you're going to have problems that other people, healthier people don't.

There's an online program called Primal Trust. It's like primaltrust.org. And that can really help reset the whole nervous system and just allow for better healing.

It's like behavioral health therapy. It's the vagus nerve retraining that and what we call limbic retraining. Really? Yeah, because especially with mold, you're inhaling these mycotoxin or these mold spores and it goes straight into the brain.

And it's, you know, it's really connected to the limbic system, which is like our fear. Yeah. And so, you know, especially if you've been ill a long time, you really need this kind of reset for the body to then be healing.

Because if not, your body's constantly in this defense mode. It's constantly in this fight or flight mode. It's not in a place where it even can heal.

And so for these people who've been chronically ill for a long time, it doesn't matter what supplement I give you. I can give you all the supplements in the world.

They're not going to respond to it or they might have a negative response to it because they're just not in a place. They need to have that sort of reset.

They need to have this more calming kind of thing happen first in their body. What was that website? It's primaltrust.org. The number one non-negotiable would probably be exercise.

People need to be moving. Our bodies were made to be moving and the minute we stop moving, that's when deterioration and shutdown start. So we're doing some kind of exercise and it doesn't have to be going to the gym.

You know, I, people that do dancing, I have people that do gardening, you know, just start where you can start. Go for a 20 minute walk. If that is the absolute most you could put out, you know, you got to start somewhere.

Yeah. And then eventually when all of a sudden you can walk an hour if you want to, and you're starting to feel a little bit better, add a little resistance.

If it's just a rubber band type workout or a little body weight resistance, build a little muscle. Muscle goes a long ways. Yeah, absolutely. I would agree.

The non-negotiables exercise, it's so hard. I've had several of my patients on their weight loss journey, like they're just so stuck and they've changed their diet and they've maxed out their semaglutide and it's like, have you thought about going on a walk?

Plus you're losing all this muscle mass with all this weight loss. I need you to exercise. I don't have time to exercise. I don't think you have time to not exercise.

Yeah, you really have to prioritize that, whatever form that takes. Oh, it's so hard. I have to wake up first thing in the morning. If I don't exercise first thing, it doesn't happen because later in the day, there's always a reason not to.

Nervous System Reset and Exercise as a Non-Negotiable

Right. No, the tyranny of the urgent, right? I don't do well first thing in the morning. So I, because I'm in charge of my schedule a little bit, I schedule it Monday, Wednesday, Friday, 11 o'clock.

I have a trainer. I have a group of friends that work out with me. Maybe I make it twice a week on a good week, you know? I've actually started hitting tennis balls with my mom on Wednesdays.

That's so good. That window's not gonna be open forever. That's quality time. But whatever it is, get out and move. You'll thank yourself for it, but your future self will thank you even more.

Gosh. Okay, man, Julia, that's been awesome. Thank you so much for joining us. Is there, you know, we, we'd see residents come by here and certainly a lot of our staff are going to nursing school and doing some of that.

Considering the state of medicine where it's at and the need that people have for, for proper healthcare. What advice would you give someone considering going to med school or graduating med school, going to residency or getting out and trying to figure out what they want to be when they grow up now that they're a doctor?

What advice would you give in a situation where it's tricky? It's tricky, but if you are really, if that's what you want to do, if you feel that that's your calling, then you should do it.

Absolutely. But medicine is changing as it should. You know, it's always evolving. And I think the direction that it's going in now is as far as there are more and more people are becoming aware of functional medicine.

there's more choices out there now and I think that's that's a really good thing because when you become more personally responsible for your health and you're not just like here I have an insurance card so I'm entitled to be healthy make me healthy you know but when you're taking personal responsibility and you're doing the things like you know eating a clean diet and exercising and getting enough sleep and then it just it And it is possible right out of residency to go out and do medicine the right way, whatever that means to you, but basically that means putting the patient first and insurance last.

But whether it's in the functional realm or you're just giving patients time and you're doing a direct primary care or probably some combination of both.

It's absolutely possible right out. Now we've always, our recruiting style has really been more go out, practice, get burned, come back, and you'll love it here.

But that's kind of hateful. You know, there's no reason why you can't do it right out of the start. No, and I love the fact that you have this direct primary care model because it just makes so much more sense.

It's special. If it wasn't for the direct primary care model, I wouldn't even be a doctor. I wouldn't care. And we're just grateful and blessed. And our goal is to spread the gospel and let more providers and staff and patients get to experience medicine the right way.

I love that you're doing membership and functional medicine and just the value you bring to your community. And then the way that you spread the word with your podcasts, how Can people follow you on your podcast or get a hold of you if they want to talk to you?

Advice for New Doctors and Where to Find Dr. Ward

Yeah. So my website is drjuliaward.com and on my website, we have a page where it has all my podcasts on, but my podcast, the functional edge is on, you know, all the like Apple, Spotify, all the major.

The functional edge. I love it. And all of that will be in the show notes as well, along with my usual stuff. So if you guys liked what you heard and you wanted to hear more, Dr.

Julie is awesome. Happy to talk to you. The podcasts are great. And. Julia, thank you so much for joining us today. We really appreciate it. And I know you're not wearing a cowboy hat, but you know, it's still, you know, you're not as cool today, but that's all right.

Thanks a lot. You have a great day. Thanks so much for having me. I really enjoyed it. That's fun. Bye bye. Thank you. Thank you for tuning in to Dr. Talks.

We hope today's episode has enlightened and inspired you on your path to optimal health. Each day is a new opportunity to make choices that empower your well-being.

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