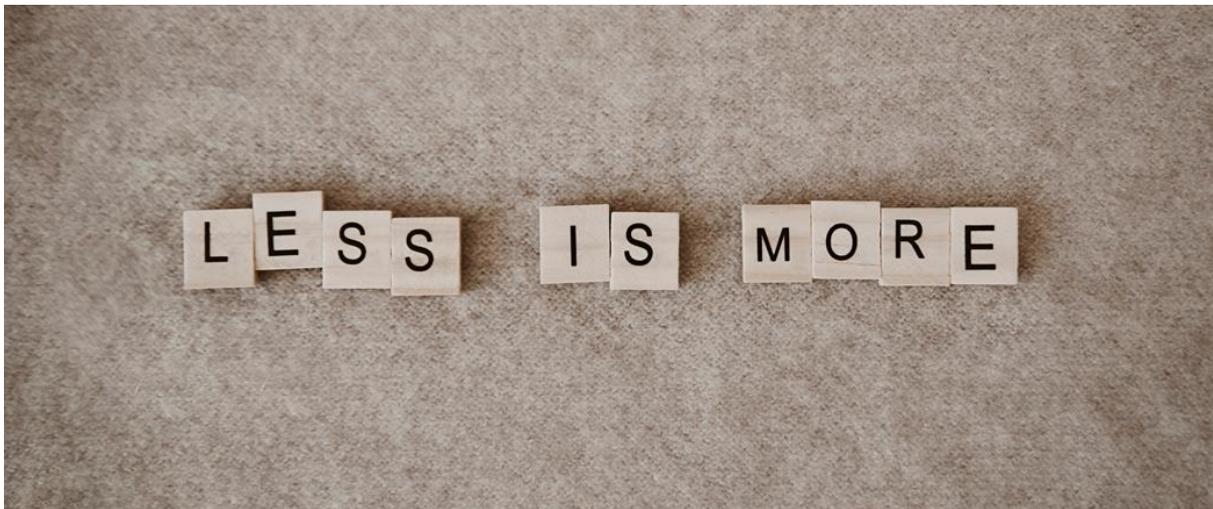




The Centre for Integrative Sports Nutrition

WHY LESS IS OFTEN MORE: *LA VIA NEGATIVA* – BY PAUL EHREN



Modern living appears obsessed with the search for the new. Cutting-edge technologies and the latest breakthroughs in all aspects of our lives are announced almost every week. We all seem to be on an express train to somewhere.

Mobile phone technology is perhaps a perfect example: the average smartphone famously contains more computing power than the Apollo 11 Lunar Model that made the first Moon landing in July 1969.

Bringing this train of thought somewhat closer to home, we need only look at the fields of nutrition, strength and conditioning, and health to know how much new research is released every week, and how difficult it is to stay up to date. Well-known functional medicine practitioner Pete Williams published a piece called 'It's okay to not know all the science' – he made the point that if we read 10 new papers a week, we would only be 10 years behind in our reading at the end of 12 months. My numbers are incorrect but it conveys the sentiment.

We seem to be in a culture where the number of references we can use to justify our view in some way validates the points made. This is particularly prevalent in the commercial world where the acceptance of an idea relates to sales and the bottom line of a company's balance sheet.

Even in the academic world, the principle often holds. I recently read an article by one of the leading and most respected strength and conditioning organisations on the coaching of female athletes. The article runs to about 3500 words and contains 157 references. Over the last week or so, I've received correspondence from six of the leading functional labs telling me about their latest innovations and why my practice needs the most up-to-date testing procedures in gut/oral/vaginal microbiomes, food allergies, hormonal balance, immunity, blood screening, and so on.

My question here is: are we constantly chasing the new and attempting to stay at the cutting-edge of research at the expense of ignoring what may apparently be simple but vastly more important information relating to our clients?

Let me introduce a few concepts which I think are worthy of thought. It won't come as any surprise to those who know me or my published work that the first of these dates back to the ancient world. The principle of '*La Via Negativa*' (literally, the negative path) has been used by some of the great Greek, Roman and Medieval thinkers, but perhaps has been best summed up by Charlie Munger, the incredibly successful US investor who works closely with Warren Buffet and has a net worth of some \$1.8 billion. Mr Munger is credited with: "it is remarkable how much long-term advantage people like us have gotten by trying to be consistently not stupid instead of trying to be very intelligent" or "knowing what you don't know is more useful than being brilliant". In other words, you can often strip things to their basics and take some seemingly negative steps backwards to achieve an outcome or goal without having to constantly work at what is considered the "cutting edge", which may well in itself be based on a false premise.

The second concept is "The Pareto Principle" or "Law of the Vital Few" which states that roughly 80 per cent of effects come from 20 per cent of causes. Putting this into a nutritional setting, we probably need not assess, screen and test every last function available to us to reach a conclusion on the nature of the problem in the majority of cases, possibly just to prove how clever or up to date we are.

The final concept is the "Ecosystem" analogy featured in my recent [webinar](#) and podcast with Ian Craig. Understanding the dynamic of the "Ecosystem" our client inhabits may well deliver more relevant information than a whole battery of functional tests and a much more reliable and workable guide to solving problems or aiding performance. At the very least, this stripped-back approach will provide the bedrock upon which we should be basing decisions rather than looking at the 'sexy' from the outset, which may be massaging our own egos more than providing a service. Good basic questioning techniques, our empathy, an understanding of a client's situation, some personal life experience, and what GPs used to call "bedside manners" is often far more beneficial than what the latest blood or hormonal testing may reveal. There will always be cases where high levels of testing are required and even vital, but this simply will not be the case in every instance or indeed initially.

As Ian and I explored during the webinar, this level of experience and empathy will not come to a practitioner immediately and will depend a lot on their individual background, but I suggest it is every bit as important, often more so, than the “techie” stuff.

To find out more about Paul Ehren, click [here](#).

To watch the webinar, click [here](#) and choose video number 14 from the playlist.

To tune-in to an audio version, click [here](#) and choose podcast number 7 from the list.