

Alternative Medicine: Doubtful Treatment or a Powerful Healing Force

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Abstract

Alternative medicine is an approach to healing used in place of conventional medicine. Complementary medicine, on the other hand, is used together with conventional medicine. For example, if a special diet is used to treat cancer in place of surgery recommended by a conventional doctor, the diet would serve as an alternative therapy. However, if a special diet were used to combat high cholesterol levels in a patient with heart disease, in addition to coronary artery bypass surgery, the diet would serve as a complementary therapy. Since the same therapy can serve as either complementary or alternative, the various therapies outside the domain of conventional medicine are often grouped together under the term CAM (complementary and alternative medicine) therapies. The increasing interest in alternative medicine, which attempts to treat a patient's body, mind, and spirit, can be viewed as a measure of the spiritual hunger in our high-tech society. The desire within the medical community to integrate treatments for a patient's spiritual needs as well as physical needs is validating the importance of pastoral care in the hospital setting. Perhaps an approach to healing that makes use of the strengths of both conventional medicine and alternative medicine would enable a person to experience the best of both medical worlds. The forms of alternative medicine with scientific backing could be used to maintain health and increase physical fitness, while conventional medicine could be used to accurately diagnose and eradicate disease. Certain cautions, however, should be observed.

Only through collaborative thinking can we paint a complete picture of world healing," Prince Charles.

"The Prince of Wales today issued an impassioned plea for alternative medicine to be given a bigger place in the mainstream, hours after a group of Britain's leading doctors issued their own appeal for the NHS to stop paying for complementary therapies," Times online [1].

In the eyes of top doctors alternative medicine is doubtful treatment and should be abandoned by NHS. They said money should go to conventional treatment; yet it appears that many patients are rejecting such treatment observed Dr Thomas Stuttaford, writing in The Times [2,3]. He noted, "The alternative practitioners have more time, and still display the art of communicating." Doctors have no time to communicate with their patients and there are limited resources, which should not be used on doubtful treatment. Future medical students should be properly selected "and they must learn to communicate," he concluded.

Is this the appropriate solution? Or is there a fear of the loss of power and control by my doctors and others involved. If alternative medicine is doubtful, why not carry out proper scientific investigation in their effectiveness and the training of their practitioners?.

In addressing the annual meeting of the World Health Organization in Geneva, the Prince argued that an integrated, holistic approach was the best way of tackling chronic disease, rather than a "dangerously

fragmented" approach that relied just on what he called the bio-physical treatment model.

Prince Charles told the WHO delegates from 192 nations: "I believe there is now a desperately urgent need to redress the fragile but vital balance between man and nature, through a more integrated approach where the best of the ancient is blended with the best of the modern, and I am convinced this is particularly vital when it comes to the collective health of people in all our countries. I say that a mix of modern and traditional remedies that emphasizes the participation of the patient can create a powerful healing force. It seems to be that in our ceaseless rush to modernize, many tried and tested methods which have shown themselves to be effective have been cast aside as old-fashioned or irrelevant to today's needs."

On the other hand, the top doctors in their letter campaigning against alternative medicine wrote: "there has been a concerted campaign to promote complementary and alternative medicine as a component of healthcare provision. Treatments covered by this definition include some which have not been tested as pharmaceutical products, but which are known to cause adverse effects, and others that have no demonstrable benefits. While medical practice must remain open to new discoveries for which there is convincing evidence, including any branded as "alternative", it would be highly irresponsible to embrace any medicine as though it were a matter of principle.

At a time when the NHS is under intense pressure, patients, the

public and the NHS are best served by using the available funds for treatments that are based on solid evidence.

We urge you to take an early opportunity to review practice in your own trust with a view to ensuring that patients do not receive misleading information about the effectiveness of alternative medicines. We would also ask you to write to the Department of Health requesting evidence-based information for trusts and for patients with respect to alternative medicine.”

Evidence-based treatments

With respect to yoga His Holiness Sri Sri Ravi Shankar subjected himself to research by seven departments at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences. The studies have shown that with regular practice of Sudarshan Kriya, one experiences flow of positive emotions, replacing anger, frustration and jealousy. EEG (electroencephalogram), blood cortisone and blood lactate level reflect a state of relaxation yet alertness and depression is cured in 70% cases. Increase in natural killer cells and antioxidant enzymes suggest that regular practice might prevent many diseases including viral infection. Fall in serum total cholesterol as well as increase in good cholesterol make Sudarshan Kriya a tool for prevention of coronary heart disease. Thus available data so far serves to validate the subjective claim of a healthier body, calmer mind and balanced emotions.

Other studies in pain control through alternative therapies before and after open heart surgery have shown that patients experienced less pain and tension during recovery than patients under traditional care.

The study, conducted at the Minneapolis Heart Institute at Abbot Northwestern Hospital, is believed to be the first of its kind, with half of the patients in a group of 104 men and women receiving alternative therapies both before the operation and during the recovery period, while the rest were treated with standard medical care.

The alternative therapies included relaxation skills training, guided imagery meditations and half-hour sessions of gentle massage. Patients listened to soft, relaxing music in the first two days following the surgery.

Patients in the traditional medical care group received no special care and were instructed simply to rest before and after the surgery. Health care professionals closely monitored the heart rates and blood pressure of patients in both groups but the findings showed little difference between the two groups. However patients in the alternative therapies group reported considerably lower levels of pain during the recovery period.

Joe Potter writes in “*Science and Healing: a Reiki Focus*”: “Useful research has taken place but has tended to be printed in the less important journals with small circulations. This makes it more difficult for these research ideas to be disseminated widely because the material cannot be accessed easily. This then creates the impression that research into healing hasn’t been done.”

Drum therapy in conventional medicine

HealthRHYTHMS Group Empowerment: Drumming is a research-based group drumming protocol that has demonstrated significant health benefits. This group works along **traditional medicine**. Their efforts are intended to serve as the impetus for

hospitals, clinics, rehabilitation centers, senior centers, nursing homes and insurers to integrate group drumming as a valuable intervention within traditional medicine. These organizations have an exceptional opportunity to offer a unique activity that combines proven health-promoting strategies including self-expression, group support, nurturing, exercise, stress reduction and of course, music making.

HealthRHYTHMS is on the forefront of establishing a solid foundation for proving the biological benefits of drumming. Neurologist Barry Bittman, M.D. and his renowned research team discovered that a specific group drumming approach significantly increased the disease fighting activity of circulating white blood cells (Natural Killer cells) that seek out and destroy cancer cells and virally infected cells. Along with conventional medical strategies, Dr. Bittman includes group drumming in all of his disease-based programs.

Common therapies offered by NHS include the following as listed by Dr Thomas Stuttaford (op cit): Homeopathy, acupuncture, magnet therapy, chiropractic, herbalism, osteopathy, reflexology, cupping, aromatherapy and hypnotherapy. Why not add: laughter therapy, drum therapy, counseling and psychotherapy?

The Daily Express According to the Society of Homeopaths: “there was considerable evidence to show homeopathy is effective against many illnesses [4].”

Dr Robert Mathews, reader in science at Aston University, says there is impressive evidence that at least some of them work- and that they may even be more cost-effective than conventional medicine [5]. He also stated that there is no scientific theory to explain how anesthetics work and added, “you can bet that Prof. Baum and his colleagues would insist on being given a general anesthetic before a major operation.”

With respect to homeopathy Robert Mathews cited the published findings of a major study by scientists at the Charité University medical Centre in Berlin and the University of Hamburg, involving 400 adults and children with long-term health problems, ranging from sinusitis to insomnia and depression [5]. “Half were treated using conventional therapy, such as pain-killers or physiotherapy for back-pain. The other half was treated homeopathically. After six months the condition of the patients treated homeopathically had improved significantly- and more quickly-than those using conventional medicine. The researchers also found that the cost of treating the patients was essentially the same-so that the homeopathic approach emerged as more cost-effective than conventional medicine. He also cited other examples with regard to acupuncture. He concluded that the complimentary approach to health has much “to teach even the most distinguished Nobel prize winners.”

If there are evidence that alternative therapies works then it is common sense that they should be integrated within the practice of orthodox medicine as is being done elsewhere and as suggested by Prince Charles. These modes of healing are worthwhile investigated thoroughly and in fact funding should continue to be invested in proper and long-term research similar to the ones in general application. If there is no compelling evidence that such and such treatment does not work, it should justly be outlawed. However, one should not ignore a powerful healing force in the practice

of caring, curing and medical intervention for those alternative treatments that work.

In a leading article in *The Times*, *Alternative Thinking*, the paper said: “Practitioners of therapies that cannot supply such evidence should continue the pursuit of proof;” however it pointed out “Mainstream medicine has wrought miracles but cannot exist in isolation” [6]. According to the paper “an enthusiasm for alternative therapies in parts of the NHS...has led to the building of five specialist hospitals and the promotion of such therapies across the service. Under current guidelines, they are available free to all who request them via their GPs.”

This is described as unfair to patients needing conventional treatments for which the NHS claims funds are not available, but also to mainstream manufacturers that must spend billions ensuring that new drugs are efficacious and safe before bringing them to market. The case for tighter control of NHS funding is strong indeed. Why not invest more funding in finding out therapies work and which does not. Mainstream medicine’s first challenge is to identify which therapies these are, admits the paper.

The onus is on them. Practitioners of various alternative treatments are providing proofs of effective outcome already mentioned earlier; and yet these are seen as only anecdotal evidence, of little scientific value, unproven clinical effect. The debate goes on. The Prince himself is arguing for, according to a Clarence House official is “for a combination of treatments where it is appropriate and where

it is proven to work [7]. He wants a more integrated approach to healthcare. He is not saying that all alternative medicines definitely work... and that there should be more research into complimentary treatments and whether they work [8].”

Acknowledgement: My sincere acknowledgement to all the authors and publication whose work I have referred to and made quoted abundantly to make a point.

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