The Emerging Acceptance and Importance of Alternative Medical Therapies

Sharlene M. Weiss, RN, PhD

In 1993, an estimated 60 million Americans used alternative medical therapies in 1990 at an estimated cost of $13.7 billion. The estimated number of annual visits to providers of alternative medicine (425 million) exceeded the number of visits to all US primary care physicians (388 million); and more than 70% of the patients who acknowledged using alternative therapy never mentioned this information to their physicians.

Complementary and alternative therapies are now in demand by health consumers throughout the developed world. They have had an impact on every facet of the health care system and all specialties of medicine. They are now available to the general public through every known means of communication including the Internet, which has become a primary source of information for many individuals. In 1995, the National Library of Medicine (NLM) expanded its number of keywords and now includes five journals related to alternative and complementary practices. The NLM currently contains more than 60,000 citations on alternative and complementary medicine.

The Office of Alternative Medicine at the National Institutes of Health

In 1992, Congress established the Office of Alternative Medicine (OAM) within the Office of the Director, National Institutes of Health (NIH) to facilitate the full scientific evaluation of alternative therapies that could improve health and well-being. OAM was also mandated to establish an information clearinghouse for the exchange of information about alternative medicine and to support research training in topics related to alternative medicine that are not typically included in the training curriculum of mainstream health professionals. The mandate of the OAM is not to support any particular alternative medicine treatment, but rather to advocate for full scientific evaluation of alternative therapies that have the potential to improve the health and well-being of a significant number of people. The OAM also maintains ongoing interest in the alternative medicine research projects funded by all of the NIH. Virtually every NIH institute has funded (and continues to support) studies concerning alternative therapies.

Definition

The current definition used by the OAM is as follows: “Complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) is a broad domain of healing resources that encompasses all health systems, modalities, and practices and their accompanying theories and beliefs, other than those intrinsic to the politically dominant health system of a particular society or culture in a given historical period. CAM includes all such practices and ideas self-defined by their users as preventing or treating illness or promoting health and well-being. Boundaries within CAM and between the CAM domain and the domain of the dominant system are not always sharp or fixed.”

The changing usages of the words alternative and complementary reflect an evolving public and professional consciousness. Alternative has most recently been used to suggest substitution, an either/or relationship, implying modalities used instead of conventional medicine, while complementary suggested modalities used together with or to complement conventional medicine. Rather than trying to define the component terms separately, the OAM defines the combined term as a significant domain of health-related activity.

Fields of Practice

The OAM NIH has grouped alternative therapies into seven categories:

1. **Mind-body interventions** refer to the interest in the mind’s role in the cause and course of illness. This role has been substantially stimulated by the discovery of the complex interactions between the mind and the neurological, hormonal, and immune systems. Mind-body interventions often help patients experience and express illness in new, clearer ways. The placebo response is one of the most widely known examples of mind-body interaction, yet it is also one of the most undervalued and neglected assets in medical practice. Psychotherapy, support groups, meditation and imagery, hypnosis and hypnotic suggestion, biofeedback, yoga, dance/movement therapy, music therapy, art therapy, prayer, and mental healing are examples of these therapies.

2. **Bioelectromagnetic applications in medicine** (BEM) is an emerging science that studies how living organisms interact with electromagnetic fields. The most important BEM modalities in alternative medicine are nonthermal applications of nonionizing radiation. Major new applications of nonthermal, nonionizing BEM fields are bone repair, nerve stimulation, wound healing, treatment of osteoarthritis, electroacupuncture, tissue regeneration, and immune system stimulation.

3. **Traditional and folk remedies** is a category that includes the following:
   - **Traditional oriental medicine** refers to acupuncture, herbal medicine, acupressure, gigong, and oriental massage.
   - **Ayurveda** is India’s traditional natural system of medicine practiced for more than 500 years. It includes lifestyle interventions (meditation and yoga), natural therapies, and herbal preparations.
   - **Homeopathic medicine** involves remedies made from naturally occurring plant, animal, or mineral substances that are recognized and regulated by the FDA. Basic research in homeopathy involves investigations into chemical and biological activity of highly diluted substances.
   - **Naturopathic medicine** integrates traditional natural therapies (eg, botanical medicine, clinical nutrition, homeopathy, acupuncture, oriental medicine, hydrotherapy, and naturopathic manipulative therapy) with modern scientific medical diagnostic science and standards of care. This practice, which has more than 1,000 licensed naturopathic doctors, is 100 years old in the United States.
   - **Environmental medicine** traces its roots to the practice of allergy treatment and recognizes that illness can be caused by a broad range of substances, including food and chemicals found at home and in the workplace and chemicals in the air, water, and food.

4. **Manual healing methods** are based on the concept that dysfunction of a part of the body affects secondarily the function of other discrete, not necessarily directly connected body parts.
Chiropractic therapy investigates the relationship between structure (primarily of the spine) and function (primarily of the nervous system). Chiropractic physicians use manual procedures and interventions, not surgery or chemotherapy.

Massage therapy is defined as the scientific manipulation of soft body tissues to return those tissues to their normal state.

Biofield therapeutics refers to laying on of hands on or near a patient’s body and is also known as healing touch, therapeutic touch, and shen therapy.

Pharmacological and biological treatments refers to the use of an assortment of drugs and vaccines not yet accepted by mainstream medicine, including antineoplastons, cartilage products, ethylene diamine tetracetic acid (EDTA), immunomodulatory therapy, coleys toxins, neural therapy, apitherapy, iscador, and biologically guided chemotherapy.

Herbal medicine includes the use of plants and plants products found in the folk medicine traditions found in all cultures. The World Health Organization estimates that four billion people -- 80% of the world’s population -- presently use herbal medicine for some aspect of primary health care.

Diet and nutrition in the prevention and treatment of chronic disease is an alternative to the Federal government’s approach to dietary intervention. The government’s strategy is formulated by boards of scientists and generally does not recommend supplementing the typical American diet with vitamins or nutrients beyond the recommended daily allowance (RDA) and does not suggest that some foods never be eaten. In contrast, many alternative dietary approaches contend that no amount of manipulation of the typical American diet is enough to promote optimum health or prevent eventual chronic illness. These alternative approaches represent a continuum of philosophies ranging from the concept that supplementing the typical American diet lies somewhat beyond the RDA necessary to promote optimum health, to the concept that supplementation well beyond the RDA is often required to reverse the effects of long-term deficiencies.

Orthomolecular medicine is the therapeutic use of high-dose vitamins to treat chronic disease. It promotes improving health and treating disease by using the optimum concentration of substances normally present in the body.

Growth in Alternative Medicine

More than two dozen medical schools and hospitals have developed programs or departments for the study of alternative therapies. At least 30 medical schools in the United States offer courses on alternative medicine, and many others provide lectures or ongoing informal programs. At least five journals devoted to alternative medicine intended for physicians and other health professionals were launched in 1995. The OAM now funds 10 Alternative Medicine Centers at US universities, which represent the major research effort of their office. The $13 million budget for FY98 for the OAM is proposed to be spent on the Centers to cofund investigator-initiated grants and to collaborate with the National Cancer Institute in evaluating the science and efficacy of unconventional cancer therapies, joint initiatives with other NIH institutes and centers, and intramural research training.

Insurance companies have now begun to offer plans that reimburse alternative practitioners. Some plans now allow subscribers access to acupuncturists, homeopaths, or wellness plans that use naturopathic physicians. Some plans cover licensed psychologists, nutritionists, biofeedback therapists, and massage therapists.

Advising Patients Who Seek Alternative Medical Therapies

A step-by-step strategy has been developed for clinicians to proactively discuss alternative therapies with their patients that emphasizes patient safety, the need for documentation in the patient record, and the importance of shared decision making. Patients may not initiate conversations about alternative therapies, but one can safely assume that many, if not most, patients are using or contemplating the possibility of trying an alternative therapy. It is vital that physicians be aware of what therapies their patients are using outside of mainstream medicine in order to guide patients away from potentially harmful therapies (eg, overdoses of vitamins or minerals) and toward potentially useful complementary techniques (eg, acupuncture or relaxation therapy).

Health professionals must address the challenge of learning more about the variety of alternative therapies and discussing these with patients when appropriate. Ending the “don’t ask, don’t tell” approach that characterizes communication between many physicians and their patients not only will provide opportunities for shared decision making and relationship-centered care, but also will benefit both patients and their health care providers.

References

