

Alternative Medicine: Why So Popular?

by

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In 1997 Americans made 627 million visits to practitioners of alternative medicine and spent \$27 billion of their own money to pay for alternative therapies. In contrast, Americans made only 386 million visits to their family doctor. It is estimated, by none other than the Harvard Medical School, that one out of every two persons in the United States between the ages of 35 and 49 years used at least one alternative therapy in 1997. That is a growth of 47.3 per cent since 1990. This is spectacular by any means and of great concern to conventional (allopathic) medicine especially since the people using alternative medicine are primarily well-educated, affluent baby boomers(1).

The trend to alternative medicine is repeated throughout Western society. In Australia 57 per cent of the population now use some form of alternative medicine, in Germany 46 per cent do, and in France 49 per cent do. The growth of some types of alternative medicine is indeed astounding. Between 1991 and 1997 the use of herbal medicines in the United States grew by 380 per cent and the use of vitamin therapy by 130 per cent. These are impressive numbers by anyone's standard(1-3).

What it is and isn't

So why do people increasingly prefer alternative over conventional medicine? The reasons are pretty simple - it is safe and it works! While there is little doubt that allopathic medicine works well in the case of trauma and emergency (you don't call your herbalist if you get hit by a car), it is much less effective when it comes to prevention, chronic disease, and in addressing the mental, emotional, and spiritual needs of an individual. These are precisely the areas where alternative medicine excels. To most of the world's population, over 80 per cent to be precise, alternative medicine is not "alternative" at all, but rather the basis of the health care system. To Western-trained physicians alternative medicine is "something not taught in

medical schools" and something that allopathic doctors don't do and, one could add, generally know nothing about. Alternative medicine actually encompasses a very large array of different systems and therapies ranging from ayurvedic medicine to vitamin therapy.

Ayurvedic medicine has been practiced in India for the past five thousand years and has recently undergone a renaissance in the West due, in no small measure, to the work and lectures of Dr. Deepak Chopra, MD. Ayurvedic medicine is a very comprehensive system which places equal emphasis on body, mind, and spirit and uses a highly personalized approach to return an individual to a state where he or she is again in harmony with their environment. Ayurvedic medicine uses diet, exercise, yoga, meditation, massage, herbs, and medication and, despite its long lineage, is as applicable today as it was 5000 years ago. For example, the seeds of the *Mucuna pruriens* plant have long been used to treat Parkinson's disease in India; it is now receiving attention in conventional circles as it is more effective than L-dopa and has fewer side effects(4).

Traditional Chinese medicine has been practiced for over 3000 years and over one quarter of the world's population now uses one or more of its component therapies. TCM combines the use of medicinal herbs, acupuncture, and the use of therapeutic exercises such as Qi Gong. It has proven to be effective in the treatment of many chronic diseases including cancer, allergies, heart disease and AIDS. As does Ayurvedic medicine, TCM also focuses on the individual and looks for and corrects the underlying causes of imbalance and patterns of disharmony.

Homeopathy was developed in the early 1800s by the German physician Samuel Hahnemann. It is a low-cost, non-toxic health care system now used by hundreds of millions of people

around the world. It is particularly popular in South America and the British Royal Family has had a homeopathic physician for the last four generations. Homeopathy is an excellent first-aid system and is also superb in the treatment of minor ailments such as ear aches, the common cold, and flu. Homeopathy is again based on the treatment of the individual and when used by a knowledgeable practitioner can also be very effective in the cure of conditions such as hay fever, digestive problems, rheumatoid arthritis, and respiratory infections.

Chiropractic primarily involves the adjustment of spine and joints to alleviate pain and improve general health. It was practiced by the early Egyptians and was developed into its present form by the American Daniel David Palmer in 1895. It is now the most common form of alternative medicine in the United States. Chiropractors not only manipulate spine and joints, but also advise their patients on lifestyle and diet matters. They believe that humans possess an innate healing potential and that all disease can be overcome by properly activating this potential.

Naturopathic medicine also strongly believes in the body's inherent ability to heal itself. Naturopathy emphasizes the need for seeking and treating the causes of a disease rather than simply suppressing its symptoms. Naturopaths use dietary modifications, herbal medicines, homeopathy, acupuncture, hydrotherapy, massage, and lifestyle counselling to achieve healing.

Vitamin therapy or orthomolecular medicine uses vitamins, minerals, and amino acids to return a diseased body to wellness in the belief that the average diet today is often woefully inadequate in providing needed nutrients and that the need for specific nutrients is highly individual. Conditions as varied as hypertension, depression, cancer, and schizophrenia can all benefit enormously from vitamin therapy.

Biofeedback, body work, massage therapy, reflexology, hydrotherapy, aromatherapy, and various other forms of energy medicine round out the vast spectrum of alternative medicine modalities.

How is it different?

So what sets alternative medicine apart from allopathic medicine?

- Conventional medicine is preferred in the treatment of trauma and emergencies while alternative medicine excels in the treatment of chronic disease, although homeopathy can also be very effective as a first-aid.
- Conventional medicine focuses on the relief of symptoms and rarely places emphasis on prevention or the treatment of the cause of a disorder. All alternative systems, on the other hand, strive to find and treat the cause of a disorder and frown on covering up the symptoms. Alternative therapies are also much more focused on prevention.
- Conventional medicine is organ specific, hence ophthalmologists, cardiologists, nephrologists, neurologists, etc. Alternative medicine, without exception, considers each person as a unique individual and uses a holistic approach in treatment.
- Conventional medicine believes in aggressive intervention to treat disease. It revels in terms such as "magic bullet" and "war" ("the war on cancer"), and prefers quick fixes (as do many patients). Alternative medicine believes in gentle, long-term support to enable the body's own innate powers to do the healing.
- Conventional medicine's main "arsenal" consists of surgery, chemotherapy, radiation, and powerful pharmaceutical drugs. Alternative medicine uses time-tested, natural remedies and gentle, hands-on treatments.
- Conventional medicine practitioners are guided in their treatment by strict rules set out by the Colleges of Physicians and Surgeons. This often leads to a "one size fits all" approach. Practitioners of alternative medicine, on the other hand, treat each patient as an individual and do what, in their opinion, is best rather than what is specified in a "rule book".

- Conventional medicine sees the body as a mechanical system (the heart is a pump and the kidneys are a filter) and believes most disorders can be traced to chemical imbalances and therefore are best treated with powerful chemicals (drugs). Alternative medicine systems, almost without exception, accept that the body is suffused by a network of channels (meridians) which carry a subtle form of life energy. Imbalances or blockages of this energy are what lead to disease and clearing of the blockages and strengthening of the energy is the ultimate goal of alternative medicine.
- Conventional medicine prefers patients to be passive and accept their treatment without too many questions. Alternative medicine, in contrast, prefers and indeed, in many cases, requires the patient to take a highly active part in both prevention and treatment.
- Both conventional and alternative medicine ascribe to the principle "Do no harm". However, while alternative medicine is essentially achieving this goal, conventional medicine seems to have almost totally lost sight of it. Hospitals are now the third largest killer in Australia and over one million people are seriously injured in American hospitals every year. Blood infections acquired in American hospitals cause 62,000 fatalities every year and bypass surgery results in 25,000 strokes a year. Two million patients experience adverse drug reactions in hospitals in the United States every year; of these, over 100,000 die making hospital-induced adverse drug reactions the fourth leading cause of death after heart disease, cancer, and stroke(5-11).
- The practice of conventional medicine is intimately tied in with the whole medico-pharmaceutical-industrial complex whose first priority is to make a profit. Although most conventional physicians have "healing the patient" as their first priority, they find it increasingly difficult to do so while operating within the system with its pharmaceutical salesmen, its rule books, its fear of malpractice suits, its endless paperwork to

satisfy bureaucrats and insurance companies, and its time pressures. Most alternative medicine practitioners have no such constraints and pressures and can give the patient their undivided attention.

- Conventional medicine generally resists the use of natural remedies long after their efficacy has been scientifically proven (Germany is an exception to this). Most alternative medicine practitioners eagerly embrace new remedies and, in many cases, can point to years of safe use. Ginkgo biloba is now the most prescribed drug in Germany and has been found effective in the prevention and treatment of Alzheimer's disease(12). Also in Germany the herb *saw palmetto* is now prescribed in 90 per cent of all cases of enlarged prostate; in the United States 300,000 prostate operations are performed each year to solve this problem. More profitable for sure, but dangerous and unpleasant for the patient(13).
- The major source of funds for medical research is pharmaceutical companies who, not surprisingly, are very reluctant to support investigations into lifestyle modifications, vitamins, and other unpatentable products. Nevertheless, a growing number of medical researchers are focusing their attention on natural supplements and remedies and are publishing their work in mainstream journals. The benefits of antioxidants have now been thoroughly documented by researchers at the Harvard Medical School and similar prestigious institutions. Folic acid, a simple B vitamin, has also been extensively studied in university laboratories and has been found to be effective in preventing or ameliorating heart attacks, strokes, angina, intermittent claudication, atherosclerosis, kidney disease, colon cancer, hearing loss, and Alzheimer's disease(14-18).

Although alternative practitioners and a small group of conventional physicians do embrace the use of natural therapies and products the vast majority of "establishment" physicians are still dragging their heels and even denigrating and ridiculing alternative medicine. This fact, perhaps more than anything else, is what is

driving the rapid and massive switch from conventional to alternative medicine.

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INTERNATIONAL HEALTH NEWS is published monthly by:
Hans R. Larsen MSc ChE, 1320 Point Street, Victoria, BC, Canada, V8S 1A5
E-mail: health@pinc.com World Wide Web: <http://vww.com/healthnews/>
ISSN 1203-1933 Copyright 1999 by Hans R. Larsen

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