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Integrative Medicine: Doctors Combine Conventional and Alternative Strategies when Patients Turn to Non-Traditional Therapy

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Echinacea is a purple coneflower plant commonly prescribed by homeopathic physicians as an immunostimulator to boost immune system function and prevent infection. (<http://images.jupiterimages.com/common/detail/31/57/22565731.jpg>)

Alternative medicine is becoming more accepted by conventional medical practitioners as beneficial for patients because 62% of adult patients try some form of alternative treatment.¹ In recent years, many medical professionals have begun implementing integrative strategies to treat their patients: such strategies employ both traditional and alternative treatment methods.¹ Studies conducted by the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM), a component of the National Institute of Health, provide some evidence that complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) strategies positively affect the wellbeing of patients undergoing conventional treatment.¹ However, it remains unclear whether the benefit is physiological or psychological in basis.² Understanding alternative medicine is essential to determine its efficacy for patients.

Integrative medicine combines traditional western (or allopathic) medicine with CAM approaches and supplements. The approach is used to manage symptoms, increase overall wellness and improve treatment efficacy. The basic principles of integrative medicine include the following: partnership between patient and practitioner in the healing process; appropriate use of conventional and alternative methods to facilitate the body's innate healing response; consideration of all factors that influence health and wellness, including mind, spirit, community and body; embrace of a philosophy that neither rejects conventional medicine nor accepts alternative medicine uncritically; recognition that good medicine should be based in good science; and the promotion of health and prevention of illness as well as the treatment of disease.⁵ In addition, the CAM philosophy recognizes the natural healing ability of the body and subscribes to the philosophy that physical health may also be affected by mental and spiritual fulfillment.

The NCCAM classifies CAM methods four domains: mind-body medicine, biologically based

practices, manipulative and body-based practices and energy medicine. In addition, NCCAM recognizes whole medical systems of treatment, which cut across the four domains.⁴

Mind-body interventions include several techniques that promote the mind's ability to affect the body.⁵ Meditation, prayer, hypnosis, music and art therapy are included within this category. Some mind-body interventions, including cognitive-behavioral approaches, are now considered mainstream.

Biologically based therapies illustrate a distinctive cross between Eastern and Western approaches to healing. These therapies use natural substances to prevent and treat illness. Herbal substances, topical lotions and salves, food combinations and special diets, orthomolecular and vitamin therapy are examples of the vast range of biological therapies that blend the cultural disciplines. In addition, orthomolecular therapy treats diseases with varying concentrations of chemicals like melatonin and magnesium. Biological therapies also include extremely non-conventional treatments: for example, some individuals have attempted to use shark cartilage to treat cancer patients.

Manipulative and body-based methods use the manipulation and movement of the body for health and wellbeing. Therapeutic massage includes a variety of Western and Eastern traditions involving bodily manipulation. Manipulation therapy includes chiropractic and osteopathic disciplines focusing on the relationship between bodily structure and function to the preservation and restoration of health. Some osteopaths believe the musculoskeletal system connects all bodily systems together so the health of one are of this system affects all of the other systems.⁵ Massage is the manipulation of muscle and connective tissue to enhance the function and promote relaxation and well being.

Energy Medicine involves the use of energy fields as therapy facilitators. Biofield and bioelectromagnetic-based therapies benefit is based on the premise that the healing force of the therapist passing his/her hands over the patient's body balances the body's energy and affects the patient's recovery.³ This form of therapy is known as Reiki. Bioelectromagnetic-based therapies involve the unconventional use of electromagnetic fields such as pulsed fields, alternating or direct current fields. The existence of these fields has not been scientifically proven yet Eastern cultures have employed biofield therapies for centuries. Electric and magnetic fields are produced in nature through thunderstorm activity and electric currents flowing through the earth's core.

In addition to these practices, the NCCAM recognizes whole medical systems that embrace the methods of all four domains. For example, homeopathy and naturopathy are whole medical systems that developed in Western cultures. Homeopathy is based on the principle that "like cures like;" it considers the possibility that natural substances producing illness in large doses may be beneficial in minute amounts. Homeopathic physicians administer small doses of specially formulated plant extracts and herbs to stimulate the body's own immune system.⁵ The use of Echinacea is an example of this homeopathic theory. In

its natural form, Echinacea, is a potent allergen and weakens the immune system. In small doses, it is thought to boost the body's natural immune system. Naturopathy emphasizes health restoration rather than disease treatment and co-mingles Eastern and Western disciplines.

Conventional and alternative strategies are currently integrating at a faster pace than in the past. While once an area of skepticism for physicians, its acceptance by patients has forced doctors to take a closer look at alternative strategies. Many doctors are studying these alternative methods and adding complementary therapy to treatment plans. Some medical schools are adding sections to better train physicians in these treatments.⁴

Despite this, many physicians' views remain unchanged because of the lack of research. Conventional medical outcomes can be documented through clinical trials and studies before the treatment is introduced to patients. CAM has no solid research to base sound decisions.⁴ For example, Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York City⁶ conducted a study to evaluate changes in symptom control, fatigue, stress and anxiety. While this research included 1290 patients, it lacked the randomized control group. Interestingly, however, the study did record an increase in symptom control and wellbeing. In 2004, the Mayo Clinic also conducted a study on alternative medicine. Their study attempted to demonstrate the acceptance of alternative treatments by patients; however, their study group was too small to conclude any solid results.⁷

The NCCAM, established to provide the public information on CAM, has begun to fund clinical trials to begin to document outcomes. These initial findings do suggest that the addition of alternative treatment to conventional medicine improves overall patient wellbeing, offering them increased quality of life and better health.

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