Alternative Medicine Essay, Research Paper

Throughout recorded history, people of various cultures have relied on what

Western medical practitioners today call alternative medicine. The term

alternative medicine covers a broad range of healing philosophies,

approaches, and therapies. It generally describes those treatments and

health care practices that are outside mainstream Western health care.

People use these treatments and therapies in a variety of ways. Alternative

therapies used alone are often referred to as alternative; when used in

combination with other alternative therapies, or in addition to conventional

therapies they are referred to as complementary. Some therapies are far

outside the realm of accepted Western medical theory and practice, but some,

like chiropractic treatments, are now established in mainstream medicine.

Worldwide, only an estimated ten to thirty percent of human health care is

delivered by conventional, biomedically oriented practitioners (”Fields of

Practice”). The remaining seventy to ninety percent ranges from self-care

according to folk principles, to care given in an organized health care

system based on alternative therapies (”Fields of Practice”). Many cultures

have folk medicine traditions that include the use of plants and plant

products. In ancient cultures, people methodically collected information on

herbs and developed well-defined herbal pharmacopoeias. Indeed, well into

the twentieth century much of the pharmacology of scientific medicine was

derived from the herbal lore of native peoples. Many drugs commonly used

today are of herbal origin: one-quarter of the prescription drugs dispensed

by community pharmacies in the United States contain at least one active

ingredient derived from plant material (”Fields of Practice”).

Twenty years ago, few physicians would have advised patients to take folic

acid to prevent birth defects, vitamin E to promote a healthy heart, or

vitamin C to bolster their immune systems. Yet today, doctor and patient

alike know of the lifesaving benefits of these vitamins. Twenty years ago,

acupuncture, guided imagery, and therapeutic touch were considered outright

quackery. Now, however, in clinics and hospitals around the country,

non-traditional therapies are gaining wider acceptance as testimonials and

studies report success using them to treat such chronic maladies as back

pain and arthritis.

The number of people availing themselves of these alternative therapies is

staggering. In 1991 about twenty-one million Americans made four hundred and

twenty-five million visits to practitioners of these types of alternative

medicine; more than the estimated three hundred and eighty-eight million

visits made to general practitioners that year (Apostolides). The U.S.

Department of Education has accredited more than twenty acupuncture schools

and more than thirty medical schools now offer courses in acupuncture

(Lombardo; Smith). As the number of Western medical institutions researching

alternative therapies increases, the legitimacy of at least some alternative

therapies will also increase.

Does all this recent medical establishment attention mean that the

non-conventional therapies really work? Critics say a definitive scientific

answer must await well-designed experiments involving many patients. Up to

now, most of the studies have relied on personal observation and anecdotal

testimony from satisfied patients. The official position of the American

Medical Association (A.M.A.)–alternative medicine’s chief critic–is that a

patient’s improvement or recovery after alternative treatment might just as

well be incidental to the action taken. This may be true for scientists and

researchers, but the fact is that the people seeking alternative treatments

disagree. The solution is obvious: more research needs to be conducted.

Some alternative treatments, such as acupuncture and herbal medicine, have

impressive histories dating back thousands of years. In America,

professional and public interest in the field of alternative care has grown

to such an extent that, in 1992, the U.S. government established the Office

of Alternative Medicine (OAM) within the National Institutes of Health

(NIH). Its mission is to speed the discovery, development, and validation of

potential treatments to complement our current healthcare system. One of the

OAM’s first tasks was to develop a classification system for the dozens of

various therapies and practices. The systems of alternative medical practice

the OAM has classified so far share many common therapeutic techniques.

Traditional oriental medicine and naturopathic medicine, for example, both

use herbal remedies, acupuncture, and mind/body control. However, some

alternative systems, such as environmental medicine and homeopathic medicine

are distinct and separate. Following are some the more popular alternative

therapies Americans use.

Acupuncture

Acupuncture is an example of a therapy once considered bizarre which has

some scientific basis. An integral part of Chinese medicine for thousands of

years, it is based on the belief that energy, which the Chinese call Qi

(pronounced ‘chee’), circulates along meridians in the body in the same way

that blood flows (Furman). A diagram of the meridian system looks similar to

those of our circulatory and nervous systems (Crute). When the flow of

energy becomes blocked, an imbalance is created, resulting in pain or

disease. To restore the proper balance and energy flow, acupuncturists

stimulate specific points of the body along these meridians. Puncturing the

skin with a needle is the usual method, but acupuncturists may also

stimulate the acupuncture points with finger-pressure.

Although Western physicians and researchers do not truly understand the

concept of Qi, there is evidence that acupuncture can influence the movement

or release of many chemicals in the body. Research conducted by Dr. Bruce

Pomeranz, a neurophysiologist at the University of Toronto, established that

acupuncture releases naturally produced, morphine-like substances called

endorphins (Crute).

In addition to releasing endorphins, doctors and clinicians know that

acupuncture can provide at least short-term relief for a wide range of pains

by inhibiting the transmission of pain impulses through the nerves.

Furthermore, recent studies also show acupuncture to be effective in

alleviating bronchial asthma, bronchitis, and stroke-induced paralysis

(Apostolides). “I’m a healthy skeptic,” says Johns Hopkins psychiatrist Mary

McCaul (Apostolides). “But look, we don’t have all the answers. Patients who

choose acupuncture feel calmer. Even if it’s a placebo effect, placebos are

powerful things.”

Mind-Body Healing

Relaxation techniques like meditation and biofeedback–which teach patients

to control heart rate, blood pressure, temperature and other involuntary

functions through concentration–have also given respectability to

alternative medicine and are routinely taught to patients and medical

students. The basic premise of mind-body medicine is that the power of the

mind can be used to help heal the body by improving the person’s attitude

and also, as recent research has shown, by direct effects on the immune,

endocrine, and nervous systems (Epiro and Walsh). Although many of the

biochemical and physiological mechanisms remain to be identified, an

increasing body of evidence is showing that the healthy mind is indeed

capable of mobilizing the immune system-and that the troubled mind can

dampen the functioning of the immune system and contribute to physical

disease.

There is little doubt that state of mind and physiological processes are

closely linked. The connection between stress and immune system response,

for example, is well documented (Epiro and Walsh). Some scientists suggest

that the power of prayer and faith healing, like some forms of meditation,

might also be physiological in that they may protect the body from the

negative effects of stress hormone norepinephrine. In addition, experience

shows that relaxation techniques can help patients enormously. “Medicine is

a three-legged stool,” says Dr. Herbert Benson of Harvard Medical School

(Epiro and Walsh). “One leg is pharmaceuticals, the other is surgery, and

the third is what people can do for themselves. Mind-body work is an

essential part of that.”

In addition to preventing or curing illnesses, these therapies provide

people the chance to be involved in their own care, to make vital decisions

about their own health, to be touched emotionally, and to be changed

psychologically in the process. Many patients today believe their doctor or

medical system is too technical, impersonal, remote, and uncaring. The

mind-body approach is potentially a corrective to this tendency, a reminder

of the importance of human connection that opens up the power of patients

acting on their own behalf.

Homeopathy

Homeopathy, despite the American Medical Association’s characterization of

it as a pseudo science, is a popular alternative that is drawing increased

attention. Founded in the eighteenth century by German physician Samuel

Hahnemann, it is based on the idea that “like cures like” (Kees); that

micro-doses of substances, known in large amounts to cause illness, can

treat that illness by stimulating the body’s own natural defenses and

curative powers. In some respects, treatment with homeopathic medicines,

nontoxic compounds derived from plants, animals and minerals, is akin to

immunization or allergy treatments in which similar substances are

introduced into the body to bolster immunity.

A substantial number of American doctors–among them Wayne Jonas, a family

practitioner who is director of the National Institutes of Health’s Office

of Alternative Medicine–have been trained in homeopathy, as have countless

nurses, veterinarians, chiropractors. While critics contend that homeopathic

remedies are no better than water at worst and placebos at best, a survey of

studies published in the British Medical Journal a few years ago indicates

that some are actually more effective than placebos, and a number of reports

document their efficacy in treating hay fever, respiratory infections,

digestive diseases, migraine and a form of rheumatic disease. “I do what

works best for my patients,” says Dr. Jennifer Jacobs of Edmonds,

Washington, a family practitioner and member of the NIH Alternative Medicine

Advisory Committee (Squires). “There are certainly situations where modern

medicine is appropriate and lifesaving, but perhaps the pendulum has swung

too far toward technology and standard pharmaceuticals and not enough toward

some of the early healing methods that have a track record in many

cultures.”

Chiropractic Treatment

Chiropractic science is concerned with investigating the relationship

between the human body’s structure (primarily of the spine) and function

(primarily of the nervous system) to restore and preserve health.

Chiropractic medicine applies such knowledge to diagnosing and treating

structural dysfunctions that can affect the nervous system. Chiropractic

physicians use manual procedures and interventions, not surgical or

chemotherapeutic ones. In 1993, more than 45,000 licensed chiropractors were

practicing in the United States (Krizmanic). Chiropractic specialty areas

are pertinent to other medical specialties, such as radiology, orthopedics,

neurology, and sports medicine. Current chiropractic research focuses on

back and musculoskeletal pain and reliability studies.

Although chiropractic clearly has its drawbacks, notably its stubborn

insistence that spinal misalignments cause or underlie most ailments,

including those far afield from the backbone, its use of vertebral

manipulation has proved useful in treating acute low-back pain and other

muscular and neurological problems. Osteopaths, licensed physicians whose

education is essentially the same as that of M.D.s, also include

manipulative therapy in their treatments. Studies at the University of

Miami’s School of Medicine Touch Research Institute have found that

premature infants gain weight much faster after being massaged than babies

in an unmassaged control group (Cooper and Stoflet). Massaged infants cry

less and are calmer than those who are only rocked. It is surprising that

only now, in the late 1990’s, are we discovering the fact that not only

infants but also children and adults respond favorably to the human

touch–both emotionally and physically.

Conclusion

Many Americans flock to alternative practices either because their suffering

has not been alleviated by standard medical or surgical treatment, or

because the traditional treatments themselves are too expensive or

dangerous. These patients often feel that the intrusion of increasingly

complicated and impersonal technology has widened the gap between mainstream

caregivers and patients. Too many doctors are thought to be coolly

professional and emotionally distant, inclined to cure a specific disorder

narrow-mindedly without comforting or caring for the patient. Americans have

made it clear with their pocketbooks that they find this unacceptable.

Thomas Roselle, a licensed chiropractor and acupuncturist who runs an

alternative-care practice in Falls Church, Va., states, “Traditional

medicine shines in crisis intervention, but where it fails at times is in

day-to-day-care. We see a lot of different things where traditional medicine

has failed to do anything about it. Too often the question of why the body

is broken down isn’t asked” (Lombardo). Of course, acceptance of alternative

medicine by the medical establishment will not occur until research has

proven its efficacy. However, with so many Americans already using

alternative treatments, doctors need to better understand the principles of

alternative medicine. It is incumbent upon doctors not only to know what

medical treatments their patients are using, but what effect those

treatments are having. Only then can doctors provide effective and safe

health care.

Apostolides, Marianne. “How to Quit the Holistic Way.” Psychology Today

Sept./Oct. 1996:

34-46.

Cooper, Richard and Sandi Stoflet. “Trends in the Education and Practice of

Alternative

Medicine.” Health Affairs Fall 1996: 226-237.

Crute, Sheree. “The Acupuncture Alternative.” Heart & Soul Oct./Nov. 1996:

90-91.

Epiro, E. and Nancy Walsh. “Alternative Medicine–Part Two: Mind Body

Medicine–Expanding Health Model.” Patient Care 15 Sept. 1997: 127-145.

“Fields of Practice-Herbal Medicine.”

.

(10 Dec. 1997).

Furman, Bertram. “Trendy Traditional Medicine for a Modern Age.” San Diego

Business

Journal 10 Mar. 1997: A7-8.

Kees, Michael. “Alternative Medicine: Down the Slippery Slope.” Modern

Medicine 1 Jan.

1997: 68-70.

Krizmanic, Judy. “The Best of Both Worlds.” Vegetarian Times Nov. 1995:

96-101.

Lombardo, John. “Alternative Medicine Gains Credibility with Some Doctors.”

St. Louis

Business Journal 30 June 1997: 16B.

Smith, Brad. “Alternative Treatments Gain Acceptance.” Denver Business

Journal 18 July

1997: 2B-4B.

Squires, Sally. “The New Medicine.” Modern Maturity Sept. 1996: 69-70.