

Alternative medicine

- A Christian perspective

KEY POINTS

The rise of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) has been fuelled by disillusionment with orthodox medicine and the attractiveness of New Age spirituality. CAM is frequently rooted in Eastern religion and mysticism and the underlying aim of treatment is often to achieve a balance in the flow of 'vital energy', by various means. Whilst some alternative therapies might justifiably become part of conventional medicine in the future, each individual modality needs to be evaluated both medically and biblically. Does it have a scientific basis? Does it work? Is it safe? What are its religious roots? Are there specific spiritual dangers involved?

Alternative medicine began to flourish at the end of the 1970s. Before then, therapies such as homeopathy, acupuncture, osteopathy and herbal medicine had dedicated adherents but were considered distinctly suspect and unconventional. In 1914 the General Medical Council issued a warning notice to newly qualified doctors, directing that there should be no associating with unqualified persons or collusion with therapists using conventional or alternative therapies without appropriate qualifications and registration with the GMC.¹

The 1980s saw mushrooming interest in and practice of alternative therapies with medical and nursing journals such as *The Practitioner* and *Nursing Times* devoting increasing space to them. The BMA and House of Lords commissioned various investigations. Although significant evidence for the efficacy and safety of such therapies did not emerge, official attitudes changed surprisingly. In 1991, Stephen Dorrell, Minister of Health, issued GP guidelines for the use of such therapies and relationships with alternative therapists.

Recent surveys suggest that almost half of the population in the UK use alternative therapies and over half of GPs practise or advise such treatments. Interest in alternative medicine has been closely paralleled with an interest in the New Age and Holistic Movement. Alternative medicine has been called its 'medical arm'.

Definition

The terminology has changed significantly over the years. When it was realised that alternative therapies could not replace conventional medicine,

particularly in serious disease, 'alternative' gave way to 'complementary'. The term 'holistic' also became fashionable, implying treatment of the whole person (body, mind, emotions and spirit). At present 'Complementary and Alternative Medicine' (CAM) is generally being used but is now being superseded, particularly in the USA, by the term 'Integrative Medicine'.

Precise definition is very difficult. In the UK these therapies are described as 'those which are not widely used by orthodox medical professionals nor widely taught at undergraduate level in medical and paramedical courses'.² A similar definition applies in the USA. However, these definitions are becoming blurred as an increasing variety of therapies are now being used in NHS primary care centres, wards and outpatient clinics.

CAM falls broadly into three categories:

1. Therapies such as acupuncture, yoga, reflexology and homeopathy, which have roots in either Eastern religion (Taoism or Hinduism) or in the concept of vital life force or energy. This is the largest group, often having New Age associations and therefore needing careful investigation from a Christian perspective.
2. Medicines based on herbs such as St John's Wort and Ginkgo Biloba. These do not have spiritual associations in themselves; after proper evaluation, they could become part of conventional pharmacopoeia.
3. Systems of medicine such as naturopathy, ayurvedic medicine and Rudolph Steiner's anthroposophical medicine include perfectly sound advice on diet and lifestyle but are combined with one or more therapies from the first group.

Why is it so popular?

1. Disillusionment with Orthodox

Medicine. Despite the pursuit of clinical excellence, there are problems in the NHS: inadequate finance and staffing, long waiting lists, postponement of operations and prevalence of resistant bugs (MRSA) in hospitals. Faults in the system contrast with easy access to alternative practitioners who give more time to patients, though at a price! Unfortunately, the personal doctor/patient relationship has become somewhat rushed and remote: reassuring touch has become less frequent than the click of a computer keyboard!

2. Iatrogenic Illness. This is understood as illness caused by doctors and their treatments and includes the toxic effect of drugs, allergic reactions, dosage mistakes and addiction to tranquilizers.

3. Royal Patronage. The Royal Family's interest in alternative therapies can be traced back to the use of homeopathy by Adelaide, wife of William IV, in the early nineteenth century. Homeopathy appears to have been practised by the Monarch until the present day and Prince Charles has been a strong advocate of this and other alternative therapies, drawing considerable attention to them during his term as President of the BMA. Much media attention has also been focused on other members of the Royal Family as well as prominent figures in public and political life who use such therapies.

4. Religion and Culture. As a result of increasing transmigration between East and West, ethnic groups settling in the UK have brought their traditional cultures with them including methods of healing based on their religious beliefs.

5. Holism. By definition, holistic medicine includes caring for spiritual ill health. In these days, there is a greater awareness of the supernatural and spiritual, making the concept of 'whole person' medicine attractive. For Christians, this means care under the direction and power of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, we need to beware of any opposing spiritual forces being involved through alternative therapies and therapists.

Comparison of essential principles

Conventional medicine is based on the facts of anatomy, physiology, biochemistry and pharmacology. Diagnosis depends upon symptoms, signs and scientific investigations

such as blood tests and X-rays. The aim is to find a specific cause for the disease.

Treatment aims to be evidence-based with a scientific evaluation of efficacy, dose and toxicity. Valid clinical trials are very important and law strictly regulates it. It is essentially non-spiritual.

Alternative medicine is based on healing systems or concepts, folklore and 'individual revelations'. It is frequently rooted in Eastern religion, mysticism or vital force/energy. The diagnosis is essentially non-scientific (except when the practitioner is medically qualified) and may involve divination, the occult, astrology, dowsing or pendulum swinging. Treatment aims to be holistic, and the 'healing power' often relates to energies within oneself. Essentially, it involves a spiritual dimension but the concept of 'God' is of a cosmic force rather than a personal Father God. It is largely not regulated by law.

The underlying aim of treatment is to achieve a balance in the flow of energy: different cultures and therapies give these different names. The ch'i of acupuncture with its two components (yin and yang, representing negative and positive energy) is the most widely known.

In assessing individual therapies, there are some suspicious phrases: life force, cosmic/vital energy, flow of energy, blocked channels, lines of force, meridians, chakras, potentiation and natural magnetism. No valid scientific evidence has been presented for the existence of meridians, energy centres or chakras.

Practical assessment of alternative therapies needs to be considered from both medical and Christian perspectives, applying checklists to each therapy.

Medical Checklist

1. Does it have a rational, scientific basis? Do the claims fit the facts?
2. Does it work? Is there consistent, reliable evidence?
3. Is it safe? Are there significant side effects?

Christian Checklist

1. Taking into consideration the lack of scientific evidence available, can it be recommended with integrity?
2. What are its roots? Is there an eastern religious basis (Taoism or Hinduism)? Is it based on life force or vitalism?
3. Are there any specific spiritual dangers involved? Does its method of diagnosis or practice include occult practices, all forms of which are strictly forbidden in Scripture.³



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TABLE 1

Universal cosmic energy

Name	Origin
Ch'i	Chinese Taoism
Ki	Japanese Shintoism
Prana	Hinduism
Mana	Maori
Orende	North American Indian
Ojas	Ayurvedic medicine
Lung-gom	Tibetan Buddhism
Vital Energy	Homeopathy
Etheric Body	Anthroposophical medicine (Steiner)
The Innate Intelligence	Chiropractic (DD Palmer)
Universal Cosmic Energy	New Age

TABLE 2

How energy flow is balanced

Method	Therapy
Needles	Acupuncture, Auricular Therapy
Massage/Pressure	Reflexology, Acupressure, Shiatsu, Zone Therapy, Cranial Osteopathy
Manipulation	Chiropractic, Osteopathy
Hands	Therapeutic Touch, Psychic Healing, Reiki
Dilute, Potentised Medicine	Homeopathy
Plant Essences	Aromatherapy, Bach Flower Remedies, Chinese Herbal Medicine
Food/Diet	Macrobiotics
Exercise, Movement, Posture	Yoga, T'ai Ch'i Alexander Technique
Meditation and Mantras	Transcendental Meditation
Postures, Breathing and Shouting	Martial Arts
Multiple Techniques	Naturopathy, Anthroposophical medicine, Ayurvedic medicine



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3. Deuteronomy 18:10-12; Ezekiel 13:20; Hosea 4:12; Galatians 5:20
4. Coker, R. *Alternative Medicine, Helpful or Harmful?* London: Monarch and CMF, 1995:ix
5. Garrow, J. Healthwatch poses questions on complementary medicine to BMA. *Healthwatch Newsletter* 1997; 25:1
6. Rowlands B. *Which? Guide to Complementary Medicine*. London: Which? Ltd, 1987:10
7. Ibid:39
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Does it work?

Due to the admixture of techniques, rituals, medicines and belief systems involved in various therapies, it has been argued that standard forms of investigation and clinical trials (such as randomised controlled trials) cannot be applied to CAM. But what is the alternative?

In the first British University Department of CAM at Exeter, Professor Edzard Ernst and his colleagues evaluate clinical trials and correlate information by meta-analysis with meticulous care producing *FACT*, a quarterly journal, as well as holding a yearly international conference. Whilst investigations show varying degrees of promise, there is little conclusive evidence. When alternative therapies appear to work, this may be due to inaccurate diagnosis, natural remission, concurrent use of conventional treatments or to the placebo effect, when the patient may feel better without significant improvement in the pathological process. Professor Ernst believes that there is ‘an astonishing and embarrassing lack of knowledge and information’ on the subject of CAM, even that relating to the most fundamental question: ‘Does CAM work and is it safe?’⁴

A 1986 BMA investigation into CAM concluded that the evidence for efficacy was scanty.⁵ This view was reiterated in 1997 when *Health Watch* interviewed Professor J Howell, chairman of the BMA’s Board of Science and Education. The careful review in *Which? Guide to Complementary Therapy* is prefaced by the warning, ‘Many complementary practitioners are well aware that they still have to prove to the world that their therapies work’.⁶

Investigation of individual therapies produces little convincing evidence for their effectiveness. There are a few apparent exceptions such as acupuncture for dental pain, nausea and vomiting as well as chiropractic and manipulative treatment for back pain. St John’s Wort seems helpful for depression and Saw Palmetto may improve prostate enlargement but unwelcome side effects have been observed.

Is it safe?

The popular view of CAM is that its therapies are advertised as being natural, safe, free from side effects and perhaps ‘God given’. Complete safety is by no means assured. Some medicines (such as some Chinese herbal preparations and aromatic oils) have been demonstrated as having toxic properties, particularly on the liver. Physical complications such as pneumothorax may arise from acupuncture. Cerebrovascular accidents and neurological damage have been recorded following chiropractic and other manipulative therapies. Whilst these complications may be uncommon, a particularly worrying aspect is possible delay or incorrect diagnosis, especially if serious organic disease is missed and conventional treatment delayed. Tragedies do occur as a result. The 1997 *Which? Guide* states, ‘Complementary medicine can be extremely harmful if used as a substitute for proper diagnosis and treatment’.⁷

PRACTICAL ASSESSMENT OF ALTERNATIVE THERAPIES NEEDS TO BE CONSIDERED FROM BOTH MEDICAL AND CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVES, APPLYING CHECKLISTS TO EACH THERAPY

From a Christian perspective, there are other important considerations. Some therapies have roots that clearly arise from Eastern religious beliefs: for example, the acupuncture of Taoism and the yoga of Hinduism. Whether these roots are accepted as important is controversial but the Bible clearly teaches that roots are important: ‘A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit’.⁸ Some Christian pastors and counsellors have observed ‘spiritual ill health’ (manifested as anxiety, depression, fear, lack of Christian assurance and interference with prayer life and Bible reading) in those who become involved with these therapies or therapists. There may also be evidence of demonic oppression.

Conclusion

A salutary note was sounded in the *New England Journal of Medicine*: ‘It is time for the scientific community to stop giving alternative medicine a free ride. There cannot be two kinds of medicine - conventional and alternative. There is only medicine that has been adequately tested and medicine that has not, medicine that works and medicine that may or may not work. But assertions, speculation and testimonials do not substitute for evidence’.⁹

Alternative medicine is a challenge to Christian doctors and other care providers. Rather than being prejudiced, we need to be informed about therapies that are so popular and about which we are often asked. We need to respond with truth, integrity and biblically based attitudes. Many of our patients are clutching at straws and we should be sensitive to this. Fundamentally, we need to ask whether there is a vacuum in our own practice of whole person care, a void that is being filled by alternative therapists and New Age practitioners. We are called to heal the sick and to preach the gospel: surely this is biblical holistic medicine!

‘Finally brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things...and the God of peace shall be with you.’ (Philippians 4:8,9 KJV)

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