

COMPLEMENTARY / ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE – A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The problem about complementary medicine/alternative medicine is not so much the presence or absence of evidence for alternative medicine. The problem is more of the very different philosophical approaches in scientific vs alternative medicine. There is a need to explore this, and try to answer this question – *what should we then do about alternative medicine?* Firstly, there should be a mindset-shift in the understanding of our role as physicians. We should look after the whole person – and if patients are interested and ask us questions about alternative medicine, we should be knowledgeable enough to help them. Secondly, be open-minded. Though there is a lot of chaff out there, there is a little bit of wheat too. We should not be too dismissive of the whole field, and brush the whole thing off as rubbish. Thirdly, we may not accept the hype or the dubious theories surrounding alternative medicine, but we have to acknowledge that there may be evidence of efficacy for some of the therapies. Finally, we should also be aware of the potential risks of these therapies e.g. adverse reactions and interactions with concurrent medications.

INTRODUCTION

I've been intrigued by the phenomenon of alternative medicine from medical student days, but was, in a way, forced to take a more serious interest in it when I started my oncology practice.

When I see children with cancer, many parents brought all sorts of things (Chlorella, Spirulina, Noni Juice etc) to show me and asked my advice on their use. I was at a loss as to how to advise them, and had to do some self-learning, and started on the journey of exploration into the realm of alternative medicine.

This period of exploration also coincided with an explosion of interest in alternative medicine in Singapore, as we can see from the proliferation of shops in Singapore with names like GNC, Nature Farm etc.

When I was asked to give a talk at the NHG Annual Scientific Meeting, I was given the topic "What is the Evidence for Alternative Medicine?" But as I was preparing the talk, it occurred to me that, for practical purposes, the problem is not so much the presence or absence of evidence for alternative medicine. The problem is more of the very different philosophical approaches in scientific vs alternative medicine. I would like to explore this, and try to answer this question – *what should we then do about alternative medicine?*

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A STRANGE CREATURE

First, to us who have been trained in what I called CSM, short for Conventional/Scientific medicine – Alternative Medicine is indeed a strange creature. It comes from a different world. It does not follow the same rules as we are used to do. Its basic philosophy is alien to us.

I would characterize the clash between our practice and CAM as a clash of two cultures – a clash between the scientific, evidence-based culture of the best conventional medical practice vs the entirely empirical, anecdotal, and often wishful culture of most types of alternative medicine.

ARE WE TOO REDUCTIONIST?

One common criticism of Western medicine is that it is reductionist. It is said that we are just technicians, and our patients are just collections of symptoms and signs and diseases. We may be so overwhelmed with the masses of facts we have to know that we forget about our humanity.

All these may be true to some extent. However, these shortcomings are not inherent in conventional medicine as such. Any failure comes from the failure of its practitioners. We can certainly be both scientific and human, or so-called "holistic", as holistic as the acupuncturist or the chiropractor.

LOVE MEANS NOT HAVING TO SAY SORRY

As I thought about the subject, it occurred to me that there is this wonderful thing about the scientific foundation of our practice that we are often not aware of, as it has become so much in our fibres. This wonderful thing is the inherent skeptical approach of scientific medicine, and thus its self-correcting nature.

Laymen often feel confused because of differing opinions and contradictory studies in medicine. A good example is the recent bewilderment about the use of hormone replacement in post-menopausal women. The thing that overturned the apple-cart was a new study that slaughtered one of the sacred cows of medicine – the belief that hormonal replacement therapy in post-menopausal women would decrease the risk of heart disease.

On the contrary, the recent large epidemiological study showed that Prempro, a combination of estrogen and progestin often prescribed to postmenopausal women, increased the risk of invasive breast cancer, heart disease, stroke, and pulmonary embolisms. The evidence is so strong that NIH stopped the trial before its scheduled completion. That, to me, is terribly encouraging.

This sacred cow has been slaughtered, and there will certainly be more to come. What I've observed is that nobody

in the Alternative Medicine field has ever said sorry, unless they have to say it in court.

They are like the New Age couple in the 1970s film, “Love Story”, which popularized one of the most ridiculous statements ever, “Love means never having to say you’re sorry”!

Many studies have pointed to obvious errors in the practice of alternative medicine, but its practitioners either persist in the same practice, or switched tracks quietly without ever acknowledging their mistakes.

THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS?

Rudyard Kipling, who won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1907, wrote a famous poem entitled “The Ballad of East and West”. He wrote, “Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet”.

I would like to explore this issue – will the twain (scientific and alternative medicine) ever meet?

I believe a beginning has been made in this meeting of 2 cultures. There has been a remarkable trend in the West recently, in that many of the mainstream medical journals have started to pay attention to alternative medicine.

The JAMA in 1997 and the BMJ in 2001 devoted almost entire issues to this topic. Some good studies have been done, including some randomized controlled trials.

I would just like to discuss 2 common herbs that have been well studied to some extent – Saw palmetto and St John’s Wort.

Saw palmetto is reputed to be effective for prostatic hyperplasia. A recent study published in the journal Urology in 2001 draws the following conclusion, “Saw palmetto led to a statistically significant improvement in urinary symptoms in men with lower urinary tract symptoms compared with placebo.”

Another popular herbal remedy is St John’s wort, the common name for *Hypericum perforatum*. Extracts of the plant have been used in folk medicine for a long time for a range of indications including depressive disorders. Extracts of St John’s wort are licensed in Germany for the treatment of anxiety and depressive and sleep disorders.

A meta-analysis in a 1996 issue of BMJ concluded that “There is evidence that extracts of *Hypericum* are more effective than placebo for the treatment of mild to moderately severe depressive disorders”.

However, as an example of the self-corrective nature of modern medicine, a recent randomized controlled trial “fails to support the efficacy of *H. perforatum* in moderately severe major depression”.

It’s also important to note that the active constituent of St John’s wort is said to active the P450 system of drug metabolizing enzymes, causing interactions with many commonly used drugs.

It is interesting to see that it is the doctors schooled in the philosophy of scientific medicine who are using the scientific approach to study a hitherto “unscientific” subject.

So, shalt the twain ever meet?

There is a recent movement to integrate the two systems. Its main proponent in the West is Dr Andrew Weil from the University of Arizona, and he calls it “integrative medicine”.

However, the concept of “zhongxi hebin”, meaning “harmonization of Chinese and Western medicine”, has been practiced in China for more than 40 years, since the Maoist era.

Many American hospitals, including the Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Centre, have jumped into the bandwagon and set up what are called “wellness centres” or “Integrative medicine service” to cater to patients who request for alternative medicine in addition to what they receive from their doctors. In the United States, The National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, or NCCAM, was established by Congress in 1998. Its mission, as stated, is “to support rigorous research on complementary and alternative medicine (CAM), to train researchers in CAM, and to disseminate information to the public and professionals on which CAM modalities work, which do not, and why.”

So, the answer to the question, “shalt the twain ever meet”, is “they’re trying”, or at least, one side is trying!

WHAT SHOULD WE THEN DO?

What shall we then do, in Singapore?

I propose the following

1. There should be a mindset-shift in the understanding of our role as physicians. We should look after the whole person – and if patients are interested and ask us questions about alternative medicine, we should be knowledgeable enough to help them.
2. Be open-minded. Though there is a lot of chaff out there, there is a little bit of wheat too. We should not be too dismissive of the whole field, and brush the whole thing off as rubbish.
3. We may not accept the hype or the dubious theories surrounding alternative medicine, but we have to acknowledge that there may be evidence of efficacy for some of the therapies.
4. We should also be aware of the potential risks of these therapies e.g. adverse reactions and interactions with concurrent medications.

In Singapore, we have had some recent mishaps, and even deaths, involving users of alternative medicine (liver failure from ingestion of slimming pills). We know well that it is dangerous to leave alternative medicine to alternative practitioners.

There is a role for us to play, and we should not leave the field entirely to quacks, charlatans, and ignoramuses.