Alternative Therapies Gaining Acceptance

Ravinder Mamtani, MD
Professor of Public Health
Senior Medical Students Manisha Deb Roy, Marwa Ahmed and Yasir Tarabichi
Weill Cornell Medical College in Qatar

Typical cases seen in a doctor’s clinic or the outpatient department of a city hospital might include the following patients:

- A young woman with a frequently occurring anxiety/depression
- A 50-year-old man with chronic low back pain
- A working mother with debilitating headaches
- A male smoker with history of diabetes and obesity
- An eight-year-old child with repeated ear and throat infections

In many instances, top-notch specialists and experts may have evaluated these patients and, too often, told some of them, “We have nothing else to offer you,” or “This is the best we can do for you,” or “You may have to live with this problem,” or other words to that effect.

Patients such as these often feel helpless and frustrated. The events and stories surrounding their suffering are innumerable and continue to pose challenges for all those concerned with human welfare, safety and health.

Some of these patients will do anything to end their agony and misery. As a result, many are turning to unconventional treatments, also called complementary and alternative medicine (CAM).

Use of Alternative Therapies on the Rise

The percentage of people using CAM therapies in the developed world ranges from 25-50 percent. In the U.S., about 40 percent of the public reports the yearly use of at least one alternative therapy, according to the Journal of American Medical Association (1998). There is widespread demand for and use of these therapies among those with chronic diseases such as cancer. Similar trends are also evident in Norway, France, Australia, Great Britain and Russia. Middle Eastern countries such as UAE and Qatar are also witnessing increasing use of alternative treatments.

Some of these alternative therapies commonly used worldwide include herbal medicine, nutrition supplements and megavitamins, acupuncture, homeopathy, massage, and mind/body interventions such as yoga, relaxation and meditation. Use of acupuncture, cupping and herbal medicine has been reported in Middle Eastern countries such as Qatar and UAE. The likely users of these therapies include those suffering from health problems such as pain, headache and migraine, premenstrual syndrome (PMS), musculoskeletal problems, arthritic conditions, or anxiety and depression.

It is becoming evident that programs that offer preventive and wholesome options based on a variety of alternative healing systems are gaining popularity worldwide. Besides forming the basis of a refreshing and novel method of treatment and healing, these programs are producing positive scientific results.
So, how effective are these treatments? Several alternative therapies have been proven to be effective for certain diseases. There is sufficient evidence, for example, to support the use of (a) acupuncture for headaches/ migraines, chronic low back and neck pain, gastrointestinal problems (nausea), and addiction problems, (b) hypnosis for pain and nausea; (c) massage therapy for anxiety; (d) herbs for certain conditions, e.g., St John’s wort for mild depression; and (d) mind/body techniques such as meditation, yoga and biofeedback for pain and anxiety disorders.

High Satisfaction Rates with CAM

Medical doctors who use CAM in their practice report benefits both for their patients and themselves. Several studies have repeatedly confirmed that patient satisfaction with CAM is very high. For cancer patients, satisfaction with CAM is high even without the expectation of anticancer effects.

There are many CAM therapies, however, that have little to offer, or might even be harmful to patients. Coffee enemas, ozone therapy, inappropriate large doses of vitamins, and use of shark cartilage are examples of such therapies.

Despite valid positive research findings, many health care providers including medical doctors remain unfamiliar with or skeptical about the usefulness and limitations of CAM. Recent survey data, however, shows physicians and patients are becoming increasingly interested in a holistic and integrated approach to disease management. This approach makes available to consumers both conventional and unconventional modalities that best serve their interest. Health care providers must become informed practitioners so they can provide appropriate and meaningful advice to patients concerning benefits and limitations of CAM. Similarly, patients interested in CAM should discuss integrative approaches to disease management with their health care providers.

A prudent approach for the use of alternative therapies is to provide them as adjunctive or complementary, rather than as alternative. While health care practitioners should be brave enough to use proven CAM treatments when indicated, they also should be brave enough to discourage the use of harmful therapies. For example, we now know that selfmedication with large doses of vitamins and unwarranted use of certain herbal supplements could have detrimental health effects.

It is not being suggested that CAM is curative, but there is sufficient evidence that if appropriately used, this discipline of medicine can successfully complement conventional treatments to provide not only symptomatic assistance to patients, but also the best health care that is available.