

EDITORIAL

Complementary and Alternative Medicine: Is It Possible to Be Mainstream?

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Complementary and alternative medicine (CAM), also known as non-conventional medicine, is used to refer to a broad set of health care practices (such as herbal medicine, acupuncture, yoga, Taichi, Qigong, meditation, manual therapies, homeopathic medicine, etc.) that are not part of a country's own tradition, or not integrated into its dominant health care system.⁽¹⁾ In fact, CAM is generally used in most developed countries, especially in North America, Europe and Australia, while "traditional medicine (TM)" is more common instead when referring to Africa, Latin America, South-East Asia, and/or the Western Pacific region.

Since the 1990s, the use of CAM has surged in many developed countries. Aging of population, prevalence of chronic diseases and stress-related diseases as well as concern about the adverse reaction of chemical drugs contribute greatly to the worldwide popularity of CAM. According to the 2007 National Health Interview Survey, which gathered information on more than 32,800 Americans, 38.2 percent of adults in the United States aged 18 years and over and nearly 12 percent of children aged 17 years and under used some form of CAM within the previous 12 months.⁽²⁾ In many parts of the world expenditure on CAM is not only significant, but growing rapidly. In Malaysia, an estimated US\$ 500 million is spent annually on this type of health care, compared with about US\$ 300 million on allopathic medicine. In the USA, total 1997 out-of-pocket CAM expenditure was estimated at US \$ 2.7 billion, while this figure has been up to US \$33.9 billion during the 12 months prior to the 2007 National Health Interview Survey.^(1,2)

Although the use and expenditure of CAM has been increased dramatically, the potential role of CAM in modern clinical practice and health care system seems to be limited, and even be questioned. Many allopathic medicine professionals, even those in countries with a strong history of TM, express strong

reservations and disbelief about the claimed benefits of CAM. The efficacy, safety and quality control have been the major concerns in the recognition of CAM and successful integration into the conventional medicine. In most occasions, CAM is just a complement or adjunct to conventional medical care. In this issue, Dr. Abolhassani⁽³⁾ surveyed the use, capability and satisfaction of CAM in comparison with conventional medicine in Iran. Although the demand for CAM increases, most Iranian patients resort to CAM as a choice at the late stage of the chronic diseases. Therefore, is it possible for CAM to be mainstream rather than only serving as a supporting role in health care system?

Recently, two famous awards honored CAM researchers exemplified the possibility of CAM to be mainstream. In September 2011, the Lasker Clinical Medical Research Award honored Prof. TU You-you who discovered artemisinin and its utility for treating malaria. She and colleagues transformed an ancient Chinese healing method into the most powerful antimalarial medicine currently available that has saved millions of lives across the globe, especially in the developing world. An artemisinin-based drug combination is now the standard regimen for malaria recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO).⁽⁴⁾ On January 24, 2012, Dr. WANG Zhen-yi and Dr. CHEN Zhu have been awarded the 7th Annual Szent-Györgyi Prize for progress in cancer research for their innovative research that led to the successful development of a new therapeutic approach to acute promyelocytic leukemia (APL). By combining traditional Chinese medicine (arsenic trioxide, As₂O₃) with Western medicine (all-trans retinoic acid, ATRA),

Drs. WANG and CHEN have provided dramatic improvement in the 5-year disease-free survival rate of APL patients—from approximately 25 percent to 95 percent—making this therapy a standard of care for APL treatment throughout the world, and turning one of the most fatal diseases into a highly curable one.⁽⁵⁾

In this issue, Dr. Park⁽⁶⁾ reviewed recent researches into the prevalence, acceptance, accessibility, and recognition of CAM. The results indicated the increasing use and acceptance of CAM in the U.S. Practitioners in the U.S. are beginning to be licensed, and insurance companies are beginning to cover some CAM therapies. Many aspects of CAM, especially traditional Chinese medicine and Ayurveda, are becoming mainstream. Acupuncture is a representative CAM therapy which has withstood the test of time and become an accepted treatment for a variety of conditions. At the 1996 WHO conference in Milan, endorsement of acupuncture extended to 64 indications as compared with 43 indications in 1979. In 1997, the U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH) formally recognized acupuncture as a mainstream medicine healing option with a statement documenting the procedure's safety and efficacy for treating a range of health conditions. In addition, other CAM interventions such as hospice care or relaxation and breathing techniques in childbirth that were once considered unconventional are now widely accepted.⁽²⁾

We have witnessed the development of some CAM therapies and their successful integration into the mainstream medical system. Nevertheless, we still

need sufficient scientific evidence from CAM research to clarify their mechanism of action and demonstrate their efficacy and safety. Dr. Micozzi, the founding editor of the *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine*, has ever said "science should not use the terms 'mainstream' and 'alternative.' Science is science." The benefits of more and more CAM therapies, we believe, will be demonstrated in the future and integrated into the mainstream medicine. This integrative approach will ultimately lead to a safer and more effective patient-centered health care system.

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