

# Insights Into Chiropractic

*Discerning the true nature of an alternative health care method*

## Are "Alternative" Treatments Helpful for Patients with Rheumatologic Diseases?

### INTRODUCTION

Alternative or unconventional therapies are defined as, ". . . medical interventions not taught widely at U.S. medical schools or generally available at U.S. hospitals(1)." Examples of alternative therapies include chiropractic, acupuncture, massage therapy, aromatherapy, herbal medicine, homeopathy, as well as many others.

In spite of the fact that alternative approaches have grown steadily in popularity, many medical physicians remain uninformed about the use of such alternative therapies. Additionally, physicians are in need of information as to whether these approaches have sound scientific evidence to support their use and whether patients find alternative approaches beneficial.

In this edition of *Insights Into Chiropractic* we will look at the demographics of complimentary and alternative medicine (CAM) and look at the findings of a recent study that attempted to discover if patients found CAM helpful.

### THE DEMOGRAPHICS OF COMPLEMENTARY & ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE (CAM)

Eisenberg et al.(1) have extensively studied the demographics of CAM in a well designed telephone survey of a national sample of 1539 adults 18 years of age or older. They reported their results in 1993 in the *New England Journal of Medicine* and what they found was surprising in terms of the use of alternative treatments as compared to the use of conventional medicine.

In terms of the percentage of the population who use alternative therapies, one in three of the respondents had reported using at least one unconventional therapy over the past year. The typical user of unconventional therapy was a person between the ages of 25-49, had at least some college education, and had an annual income above \$35,000. In addition, black Americans were least likely to use practitioners of alternative therapies as compared to other racial groups.

Perhaps the most surprising information reported by the *New England Journal of Medicine* study are the national projections of use and expenditures made on unconventional treatments. The authors state, "*Extrapolation to the total U.S. household population suggests that in 1990 an estimated 61 million Americans used at least 1 of the 16 unconventional therapies we studied and approximately 22 million Americans saw providers of unconventional therapy for a principal medical condition . . . The estimated number of ambulatory visits to providers of unconventional therapy in 1990 was 425 million (95 percent confidence interval, 302 million to 548 million). This number exceeds the estimated 388 million visits in 1990 to all primary care physicians (general and family practitioners, pediatricians, and specialists in internal medicine) combined . . . Americans spent approximately \$11.7 billion for these services in 1990(1).*"

Among the conditions studied, back problems were the most common condition for which respondents sought treatment from unconven-

tional therapists followed by anxiety, headaches, chronic pain, and cancer or tumors. Since back problems, chronic pain, and headaches were among the most common ailments respondents sought unconventional treatment for, it is no surprise that chiropractors were the most often used practitioner of alternative therapy.

Physicians often wonder why patients seek alternative therapies. Eisenberg gives five reasons patients seek alternative treatments: health maintenance and promotion, all conventional treatments have been tried, conventional treatments are of undetermined effectiveness or carry significant side effects or risks, there exists no conventional therapy for the patient's condition, and the patient perceives the conventional therapy is not spiritually or emotionally satisfying.

#### CAM, RHEUMATOLOGIC DISEASE, & PATIENT SATISFACTION

In 1999 Rao et al.(2) published the findings of their study of 232 subjects who represented a typical sample of patients receiving allopathic treatment for rheumatologic conditions. Among these subjects the average age was 55.5 years, almost three-fourths were women, and nearly 90% were Caucasian. The most common diagnoses for this sample were rheumatoid arthritis (41%), fibromyalgia (19%) and osteoarthritis (16%).

Of the 232 patients included in the survey, 146 (63%) reported trying CAM for their condition. Of these 146, better than 90% reported regular use of one or more forms of CAM.

Not surprisingly, the most often used form of CAM for these subjects suffering with rheumatologic disease was chiropractic treatment. Of those subjects utilizing the services of a doctor of chiropractic, 73% reported that the chiropractor was helpful in dealing with their condition.

In addition, Rao et al. stated that their study subjects, ". . . most frequently reported using CAM to relieve pain, and nearly half reported that they used CAM because their prescribed medications were ineffective(2)."

For whatever the reason a patient might have for seeking alternative therapies, the patient's medical provider should have some information regarding the therapy or treatment so he/she may provide accurate information about safety and efficacy of the proposed treatment. Regarding CAM therapies Eisenberg states, "*Reviewing the current medical literature fails to provide unequivocal documentation of the safety or efficacy of the overwhelming majority of alternative therapies(1).*" He goes on to state that chiropractic manipulation for back pain is one of the few notable exceptions to this rule. In fact, over 37 randomized controlled trials exist that indicate the clinical effectiveness and safety of chiropractic manipulation for back pain(3), with additional studies on the safety and effectiveness of chiropractic manipulation for neck pain(4,5), and headache(4).

#### CONCLUSION

Estimates suggest that up to one-third of all Americans have used at least one form of CAM therapy in the past twelve month period. The estimated use amongst patients suffering with rheumatoid arthritis, fibromyalgia, and osteoarthritis is greater than half of all Americans with such a diagnosis.

The estimated number of office visits per year to unconventional practitioners exceeds estimates of the number of office visits to all primary care physicians. The most often consulted alternative practitioner is the doctor of chiropractic. The use of chiropractic physicians has doubled over the past twenty years, due in part to scientific evidence confirming the safety and efficacy of chiropractic treatment.

Clearly, the rising utilization of unconventional practitioners, such as chiropractors, indicates the public's desire for alternative methods of treatment. Given the public's desires, in combination with scientific evidence confirming the safety and efficacy of chiropractic treatment, and the overall high rates of satisfaction with chiropractic, a greater level of cooperation between the medical and chiropractic professions is required to elevate the level of patient care in our community.

## REFERENCES

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