

Insights Into Chiropractic

Discerning the true nature of an alternative health care method

Why Should Medical Physicians Be Interested In "Alternative/Unconventional" Therapies?

INTRODUCTION

Although organized allopathic medicine has vehemently opposed alternative medicine since the founding of the American Medical Association in the mid-nineteenth century(1), alternative healing approaches have survived—and in some cases—flourished in the United States. Alternative or unconventional therapies are defined as, ". . . medical interventions not taught widely at U.S. medical schools or generally available at U.S. hospitals(2)." 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 such alternative approaches. This uninformed status persists even though some alternative therapies are reimbursed through patients' health plans, of which primary care physicians are the gate through which patients must pass to gain access to practitioners of alternative treatments.

Who uses alternative treatments? How often do patients seek practitioners of alternative therapies? What alternative treatment is most used and for what condition(s) is it appropriate? Why do patients want alternative approaches? Where can one find a reliable practitioner of an alternative method of treatment? These questions are what this edition of this newsletter will attempt to answer.

THE DEMOGRAPHICS OF ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE

Eisenberg et al.(2) have attempted to answer many of the questions posed above 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(2)."

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

In a recent study published in the American Journal of Public Health, Hurwitz et al.(3) reported remarkably similar demographic data for the typical chiropractic patient as compared to the typical overall user of unconventional therapies presented by Eisenberg et al.(2). Hurwitz and colleagues also reported that low back problems make up two-thirds of the patients treated by chiropractors with head and neck pain and extremity problems making up almost all the rest. Interestingly, only one percent of chiropractic patients have non-musculoskeletal diagnoses(3).

ALTERNATIVE TREATMENTS AND ALLOPATHIC MEDICINE

In a follow-up article Eisenberg(4) discusses the challenges faced by medical practitioners in treating patients who use alternative health care therapies, or those who wish to try an unconventional method of treatment. He states his research indicates that over 70% of patients who use alternative therapies never informed their medical providers that they used such therapies. He further suggests that

medical physicians should inquire about the use of such therapies since some (especially herbal or nutritional therapies) might amplify or reduce the effects of common medical treatments, such as the use of some medications.

As a medical physician you might 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.

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 alternative 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(4)." 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(5), with additional studies on the safety and effectiveness of chiropractic manipulation for neck pain(6,7), and headache(6).

HOW DO YOU KNOW IF AN ALTERNATIVE PROVIDER IS REPUTABLE?

There is no one "sure fire" method to tell if a practitioner of any kind is reputable and competent. Certainly a practitioner should hold a valid license in the state in which they practice. Membership in state or national associations are sometimes indicators of a particular

commitment to professional pursuits. Although perhaps desirable, these affiliations are no guarantee of competence or adherence to a particular code of ethics. Bizarre variations in practice methods are more a function of individual personality inherent to human beings, rather than being strictly unique to any one type of health care or alternative health care provider. Eisenberg's article from the *Annals of Internal Medicine*(4) lists a number of journals, computer databases, and other information resources that may be helpful to the interested reader.

Perhaps the best way to identify a competent, suitably licensed alternative provider is to meet with the practitioner to learn how they approach the care of their clients or patients, have a tour of their office, and gain a personal sense of the type of person/practitioner they are. Another method is to talk with a colleague who may have had occasion to co-manage a patient with an alternative practitioner. Patients you respect and with whom you have a good comfortable working relationship can also be a good source of information about a particular unconventional health care practitioner.

CONCLUSION

Estimates suggest that up to one-third of all Americans have used at least one form of alternative or unconventional therapy in the past twelve month period. 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. Doesn't it make sense to learn something about the more prominent

forms of alternative treatment to be able to more effectively guide and assist your patients' health care choices? The answer seems obvious.

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