

Holistic Medicine: A Very Modern and Very Old Approach to Healing

Michael Cheikin MD
September 2004



Center for Optimal Health
Health, Wellness and Education in One Center
832 Germantown Pike, Suite 3
Plymouth Meeting, PA 19462
610-239-9901 drc@c4oh.org

While originally called "alternative" or "complementary", implying an opposition to traditional medicine, over the past few years, the terms "integrative" or "holistic" have evolved, suggesting that all modes of treatment and healing be balanced in a cooperative manner. In fact, while many patients still do not tell their doctors about their use of "alternative" medicine, most consumers prefer that they be looked at as a whole person, and that their care be provided by a coordinated team of practitioners in an integrated manner.

"Modern" medicine is only 100 years old, beginning with the age of bacteria and antibiotics. Before that, there were folk remedies, often based on plant materials, homeopathy, and other techniques such as acupuncture, some of which evolved over several thousands of years.

The advances of medicine, including microbiology, surgery, pharmacology, and genetics are truly amazing and effective. However, our society is facing a crisis in health care on numerous fronts: 1) increased incidence of chronic disease, such as arthritis, heart disease, obesity or chronic pain, for which traditional medicine only offers limited or unsatisfactory treatment 2) growing costs of health care, making it less accessible to a growing population; 3) significant dissatisfaction by providers of health care due to HMO's, malpractice, and expectations; 4) growing dissatisfaction by consumers of health care, who do not feel they are getting their value for what they pay for health care.

In response to this crisis, people are turning back to modalities that have existed through the ages. While not offering dramatic "cures", over time, they often help the healing process.

What is the Difference Between "Traditional" and "Non-Traditional" Modalities?

There are many mysterious aspects of illness and healing that have not yet been studied, such as why certain people get dis-ease and others do not. Even identical twins, with identical genes, only share illness about 30% of the time, which implies that 70% of illness comes from somewhere else. Sickness and healing are multi-dimensional processes that involves biochemistry, psychology, and spirit. The holistic approach utilizes a different "model", in which the "cause" of a disease is not a single agent, such as a bacterium, but a web of factors. Looking at illness from this complex point of view requires a "paradigm shift". For example, even with a bacterial infection, it is not possible to explain by conventional medicine, why only a certain percentage of people exposed to the bacteria will become infected. From the holistic perspective, we would look at your stress, nutrition, exercise, and your spirit.

It is practically impossible, using current scientific models, to fully explain how acupuncture, homeopathy, or hypnosis work, though we know they do if used for the right conditions. Rather than reject these modalities for lack of "proof", we accept their strengths and limitations,

just as we do with traditional medicine. While many "traditional" modalities have been tested and "proven" effective by the scientific method, which utilizes the "double-blind, placebo controlled study", many of these treatments (such as the "purple pill") do not get to root cause and cause long-term negative effects. Modalities such as herbs and acupuncture are much harder to standardize and study, but individual reports, over the centuries, have won credence for these modalities. Many modalities believe in another form of energy that flows through the body. In China, this energy is called "chi" or "qi", while in India it is called "prana".

While some proponents of traditional medicine allege that "alternative" medicine is dangerous, there are more illnesses and death caused by traditional medicine than alternative medicine. Similar to the "military-industrial complex" of the early 20th century, we now face a "food-drug-insurance complex" in the beginning of the 21st century that is causing epidemics of disease and is bankrupting our economy and our trust in the Social Security and Medicare of the future.

A Change in Philosophy

Alternative medicine also requires a change in philosophy on the part of the seeker and provider. As a consumer, not patient, you are expected to take personal responsibility and to accept slow, steady results rather than look for a magic bullet. You are expected to take an active role in your care-learning, observing, working to heal, being honest with yourself and your practitioner about who you really are and where you are in your life. Your practitioner can be expected to spend time with you, to listen, to validate your emotions and subjective world, which are very important for the healing process. Most modalities are not "covered" by health insurance and require an investment for your long-term health. However, most see a "return" on investment, just as putting pennies away, over decades, leads to future wealth.

What are the Types of Alternative Medicine?

For the purpose of seeing the whole picture, I have grouped the modalities into the following:

Mind-Body/Spiritual/Emotional/Consciousness-based on the power of the human mind and spirit/consciousness: relaxation, hypnosis, meditation, prayer, music, journaling/writing, biofeedback, humor

Chemical-based upon the effects of chemicals on the body, which alter genetic expression, receptors and metabolic processes: herbs, nutrition (special vitamin and chemical supplements) aromatherapy;

Energetic-based on the belief that illness is in part caused by the blockage or imbalance of flow of energy through the body: acupuncture, magnets, homeopathy, some aspects of yoga;

Hands on (which also have an energetic aspect)-based on the mechanical, neurological, psychological and energetic effects of touch: chiropractic, massage, shiatsu,

reflexology, Feldenkrais, therapeutic touch, Reiki and Rolfing;

Movement -based on the mechanical, neuro-psychological and energetic effects of movement: yoga, tai chi, qi gong, Alexander and Feldenkrais.

How do I Proceed?

Before beginning any course of holistic/alternative therapy, we recommend a thorough medical evaluation to rule out serious conditions that may require traditional therapies. While it is your option to reject such therapies, informed consent requires that you know all your options, with their associated risks benefits and alternatives.

Then, with your participation, based upon your goals and priorities, a customized plan is developed. Some people seek immediate results-others prefer a less aggressive, long-term approach. The ultimate goal is to use minimum interventions to restore and maintain a healthy, productive, balanced life. Once treatment begins, your practitioner will normally want to see you every 2-8 weeks, depending upon multiple factors.

How Do I Find the Right Modality and Practitioner?

There are many ways to evaluate the quality of a modality and practitioner. Some factors are: recommendations by friends and other practitioners, history of the modality, years of experience of the practitioner, type of training, association with health care organizations, evidence of continued education, and publication. It is your responsibility to know where you are going and why. The vast resources of the internet make this task easier than any other time in history (see our Resource List for books and Web sites). However, be on the lookout for false claims and misinformation that cannot be substantiated-both for traditional and "alternative" treatments.

How do I Integrate or Balance my Treatment between Traditional and Non-Traditional Modalities?

Our recommendation is to be respectful of your body and the healing process. This involves leaning about each approach, both Traditional and Alternative, and working cooperatively with your practitioners to integrate modalities. If already receiving treatment for a potentially dangerous disease, such as diabetes, hypertension or cancer, first optimize your condition through Traditional means, then gradually add in new desired modalities and then, with the involvement of your practitioner, gradually cut back on the interventions you dislike. Be honest but also firm in expressing and pursuing your desires to others-there are many vested interests, even within families, that resist change, even for the better.

How will medicine be practiced in the future?

As the drug and insurance industries are bankrupting our health care system, I anticipate greater consumerism and changes. More and more doctors will have no choice but to opt out of accepting insurance. On the other hand, most of us will be able to put tax-free dollars away (in "medical savings accounts") to spend on health care. I predict that we will ultimately only purchase "catastrophic"

health care, for serious accidents and illnesses, and then use cash to purchase our everyday care. Since a large amount of the premiums we (and our employers) are paying goes into the pockets of the insurance companies and their executives, this will ultimately cost us less.

If you think about it, this is how all other insurance works-you don't pay for car insurance to replace your tires, and don't pay for home insurance to paint the house or pay for heating. In the past, the insurance industry has blocked efforts to create medical savings accounts, as they knew that it would cause more consumerism. However, with spiraling costs and incredible greed on the part of drug companies and executives, public demand is catching up. While paying cash for "fee for service" may seem, on the surface, more expensive, in the long run it will save each family thousands of dollars a year, and will promote a healthy atmosphere focused on prevention. The thousands that each family will save can be spent on valuable modalities such as organic foods, quality supplements, exercise classes, stress management and personal growth.

IMPORTANT NOTE: This general information should not be used to make decisions about medical care without the involvement of a knowledgeable practitioner.

For More Information

- oSee my articles on: Detoxification, Elimination and Simplification and What We Really Need
- oMy website, www.c4oh.org, has helpful articles on related topics
- oChallem, Jack: The Inflammation Syndrome: The Complete Nutritional Program to Prevent and Reverse Heart Disease, Arthritis, Diabetes, Allergies, and Asthma. NY: Wiley, 2003. ISBN 0471-478-814
- oCampbell, TC & Campbell TM: The China Study: The Most Comprehensive Study of Nutrition Ever Conducted and the Startling Implications for Diet, Weight Loss and Long-Term Health. Benbella Books, 2005. ISBN: 1932-100-385.
- oJoy, W. Brugh: Joy's Way. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979. ISBN 0874-770-858.
- oCameron, Julia: The Artist's Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity. Penguin, 1992. ISBN 0874-776-945.
- oSivananda Center: The Sivananda Companion to Yoga. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983. ISBN: 0684-87000-2.
- oLasater, Judith P.T. Ph.D.: Relax and Renew: Restful Yoga for Stressful Times. Rodmell Press, 1995. ISBN: 0962-713-848.

The contents of this article are copyright 2006 by Michael Cheikin MD and may not be reproduced without express written permission.

Michael Cheikin MD is a holistic physician, Board Certified in Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation ("Physiatry"), Pain Management, Spinal Cord Medicine and Electrodiagnostic Medicine. He has provided leadership to several local medical institutions. Dr. Cheikin utilizes conventional and "alternative" modalities, including special lab tests, nutrition, yoga and acupuncture to enhance the healing of obscure, chronic and severe problems. He accepts most insurances for consultation. 610-239-9901 or drc@c4oh.org.