Conventional and Alternative Health Care:

The Future of Medicine

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Abstract

This research paper argues for the complementary use of alternative therapies in the conventional medical community. While scientific research and study on most alternative medicines are fairly new, results are showing they may help ease physical and emotional illness. When combined with standard medical care, alternative medicine may offer a more integrated approach to healing. Alongside peer-reviewed sources, I offer up my own personal experience to argue for the inclusion of alternative medicine.
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If you have ever felt ill, visited an urgent care clinic and left with a prescription for an antibiotic, you’ve received conventional medical care. This form of care is also known as “standard medical care” and is practiced by a medical doctor or a doctor of osteopathy. It is also practiced by healthcare professionals, such as physical therapists, physician assistants, psychologists, and registered nurses. The rate at which conventional medicine is advancing is extraordinary. However, there is growing concern that our culture has allowed the health care industry to become so influential and disproportionately lucrative that it is now in the business of illness rather than health. The twenty-first century finds a staggering number of people turning to more holistic, less drug-oriented therapies. Some seek alternative medicine in place of conventional medicine, while others view it as complementary. As orthodox medicine becomes more invasive and less perceptive of the human body as a whole, informed people are looking to be heard and seen elsewhere. The moment has certainly come for a partnership between conventional and alternative medicine, so that the healing resources from both sides can be optimally employed. It is my belief that the greatest ally of today’s standard medical care is alternative medicine. This is the future of medicine.
More so, it is imperative that we as a people are re-educated about our health and our options. Often times, we find ourselves feeling intimidated by doctors and disease. There is no prescription more valuable than knowledge and truth. There shouldn’t be an assumption that standard medical care, in its basic concepts, is complete. The medical community must see progress for what it is. We must attempt to set all preconceived notions aside and look at alternative medicine with an open mind. Today’s consumers are not only more aware of alternative health care choices, but now, more than ever, people are taking steps to gain control over their health. The use of alternative medicine appears to be increasing. Syed Tabish, a professor of medicine, reports that the use of alternative medicine in the USA rose from 33.8% in 1990 to 42.1% in 1997. Change is happening – while we may be treating disease, we may not be preventing it.

Many different areas make up the practice of alternative medicine. In addition, many parts of one field may overlap with the parts of another field. While there are numerous therapies, there are five alternatives to conventional medicine that are gaining popularity today. They include naturopathy, traditional Chinese medicine, Ayurvedic medicine, chiropractic, and aromatherapy. It is important to illustrate the benefits of applying these five forms of alternative medicine to standard medical care. At the end of this paper, I will offer my own personal experience with one of these healing modalities.

To begin, naturopathic physicians become qualified in the application of natural health care through accredited medical colleges. Naturopathy is considered a complete medical system. Tabish writes, “Naturopathic medicine views disease as a manifestation of alterations in the processes by which the body naturally heals itself and emphasizes health restoration rather than disease treatment.” According to the Association of Accredited Naturopathic Medical colleges
(AANMC), in the 1970’s there was a rise of interest in naturopathic medicine in North America. This resulted in rapid growth and maturation of the naturopathic profession to where it is today. As of 2016, there are seven naturopathic doctoral medical institutions offering degrees in eight locations across the United States. The Council on Naturopathic Medical Education (CNME) is the accrediting body for these programs. After graduating from a CNME accredited naturopathic medical institution, students are eligible to sit for the Naturopathic Physicians Licensing Examination (What is Naturopathic).

Naturopaths offer primary patient care that couples natural medicine with conventional diagnosis and treatment. They treat the cause of illness, believe in preventative medicine, and teach patients how to live healthier lives. Naturopaths utilize many therapies to treat patients. These include nutrition, lifestyle medicine, homeopathy, physical medicine and herbal therapies. The 2009 Department of Labor Custom Report states that the job description of a naturopathic physician (ND) is to:

- Diagnose, treat, and help prevent diseases using a system of practice that is based on the natural healing capacity of individuals. May use physiological, psychological or mechanical methods. May also use natural medicines, prescription or legend drugs, foods, herbs, or other natural remedies (What is Naturopathic).

In a peer reviewed article found in the Journal of Traditional Medicine and Clinical Naturopathy, the effectiveness of homeopathic medicine (often used in naturopathy) on reducing symptoms of anxiety and depression was reported by researcher, Mandana Bagherian. Homeopathy is defined as an alternative medical therapy in which extremely dilute amounts of certain natural substances are used to treat various ailments. In the study, the patients were
evaluated based on Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) and Spielberger State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI)-Y. Homeopathy was then used in an attempt to relieve patients of anxiety and depression.

According to the results of this study, homeopathic remedies reduced both anxiety and depression symptoms dramatically! These findings may offer hope to those suffering. While conventional medicine offers treatment for both anxiety and depression, perhaps it would be wise to entertain all possible therapies that may aide a patient. Evidently, naturopathic medicine could be an option.

Moving forward, a second well known alternative therapy is traditional Chinese medicine (TCM). Traditional Chinese medicine is an ancient form of Eastern medicine that developed in China over 3,000 years ago. Similar to naturopathy, it is built upon a singular foundation: the key to health is a harmonious balance of body, mind and spirit. However, in TCM this balance depends on the unobstructed flow of qi (pronounced chee) or “life energy” through the body, along pathways known as meridians. Traditional Chinese Medicine practitioners see disease as the result of disruptions in the circulation of qi. In this approach, all things in nature, including the human body, are comprised of qi. However, this energy consists of two parts. TCM depicts this as two halves of a whole. They represent the opposing forces, you may already know as yin and yang. Health is believed to rely on the balance of these two forces. Traditional Chinese medicine focuses its healing through maintaining the yin-yang balance (What is TCM?).

Traditional Chinese medicine doctors may employ several types of treatment to restore and maintain this balance. These healing modalities include:

- Acupuncture - involves inserting thin metal needles placed along the body’s meridians.
• Acupressure – the application of pressure to points along the body's meridians using hands/ fingers.

• Chinese herbalism – form of treatment using herbs, roots, powders, or animal substances to help restore balance in the body. They are usually combined into a formula that is dispensed in the form of a traditional tea, capsule, liquid extract, granule, or powder.

• Cupping – the application of warm air in glass jars to create suction on areas of the body to help stimulate qi.

• Diet – the use of yin and yang foods to help restore the yin-yang balance in the body.

• Moxibustion – the use of small amounts of heated plant fiber (moxa, or Chinese mugwort) on specific areas of the body.

It is important to note, most states require national board certification for TCM practitioners. Practitioners of traditional Chinese medicine must complete at least three years full-time schooling before they are eligible for the national board certification. This is offered by the National Certification Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine (NCCAOM). Most states require national board certification as a prerequisite for state certification or licensure. Currently, there are more than 50 master's programs for acupuncture and Oriental medicine in the United States. (What is TCM?)

Interestingly, most research studies on TCM focus on specific techniques, primarily acupuncture and Chinese herbal remedies. One peer reviewed article looked at the efficacy of acupuncture in postoperative pain management. Standard medical care providers often deal with patients suffering postoperative pain – usually resulting from surgical trauma. Opioid analgesics are the preferred method of treatment for postoperative pain; however, these drugs are associated
with a number of dangerous side effects. The article reported findings that indicate “certain modes of acupuncture improved postoperative pain on the first day after surgery and reduced opioid use.” Much like naturopathy, the use of acupuncture as an “adjuvant therapy” in treating postoperative pain seems worthwhile (The Efficacy of Acupuncture).

Similar to TCM, Ayurvedic medicine (also called Ayurveda) is one of the world’s oldest medical systems – a system born in India more than 5,000 years ago. Fascinatingly, its practice in India remains at forefront of the country’s health care system. In Ayurveda, perfect health is viewed as a balance between body, mind, spirit, and social wellbeing. Undoubtedly, this concept of mind, body, and spirit seems to be a shared belief in many alternative medicines.

The word “Ayurveda” connects the Sanskrit words ayur (life) and veda (science or knowledge). Its practices predate written records and were passed down through word of mouth. To illustrate just how old this form of medicine is, there are three ancient books known as the Great Trilogy that were written in Sanskrit more than 2,000 years ago. They are considered the main texts on Ayurvedic medicine. They are called Caraka Samhita, Sushruta Samhita, and Astanga Hridaya. (Ayurvedic Medicine: In Depth)

Ayurveda is based on the principles of three “doshas”. These doshas are the energies that are believed to make up the human body. They each serve to perform different physiological functions. This concept of doshas is somewhat similar to TCM’s ying vs yang. To note, the first dosha is called Vatta. This energy is thought to control blood circulation, breathing, blinking, and the heartbeat. The second dosha is called Pitta. It is believed to control the body's metabolic systems, including digestion, absorption, nutrition, and your body's temperature. Lastly, the third dosha is called Kapha. It is thought to be responsible for supplying water to all body parts, moisturizing the skin, and maintaining the immune system. Ayurveda asserts the belief that each
person naturally possesses all three doshas. However, only one or two should dominate to maintain perfect health. *Ayurveda: A Brief*

Currently, there are no states in the United States that license Ayurvedic practitioners, although, a few have approved Ayurvedic schools. Many practitioners are licensed in other health care fields, such as midwifery or massage. Ayurvedic medicine is not commonly studied or viewed as a form of (western) medicine. Nonetheless, India’s government and other institutes throughout the world support clinical and laboratory research on Ayurvedic medicine, within the context of the Eastern belief system.

For instance, a preliminary clinical trial in 2011, funded in part by the National Center for Integrative Health (NCCIH), found that conventional and Ayurvedic treatments for rheumatoid arthritis had similar effectiveness. The conventional drug tested is known as “methotrexate”. The trial studied Ayurvedic forms of treatment of which included 40 herbal compounds. There was also another 2011 preliminary clinical trial that found osteoarthritis patients who received a compound derived from *Boswellia serrata* (frankincense) had diminished levels of pain, compared to patients receiving a placebo (*Ayurvedic Medicine: In Depth*). We can clearly see that alternative medicine, in conjunction with conventional medicine, offers tremendous hope in treating disease and illness.

While there are limited sources of information on Ayurveda in the West, *Annals of Ayurvedic Medicine* is a quarterly peer reviewed journal by the Society of Ayurvedic Physicians of India that serves to provide information pertaining to this form of alternative medicine. In the editorial, “Preventive Oncology and Ayurveda” author, Ram Harsh Singh, reports that Ayurveda offers the prevention of diseases with the help of “life style modification, healthy dietetics and nutrition.” Much like the case with naturopathy and TCM, Singh believes Ayurveda should be
used alongside conventional treatments prescribed by medical doctors. Utilized as complementary medicine, he reports that Ayurveda “can help to reduce the adverse effect of modern medications and will accelerate the healing process besides promoting the overall health of the patient.” Truly, alternative medicine is an ally of conventional medical care.

This truth is well illustrated in Chiropractic medicine. Michael Schneider, professor of health sciences at the University of Pittsburgh, states “Chiropractic was the original holistic medicine in that it focused on treating the whole person, not just the body part that hurt” (Are Chiropractors Legitimate). While chiropractic medicine was once considered a pseudoscience, it is now widely accepted within the medical community – so much so that it is covered by several insurances.

The word “chiropractic” connects the Greek words *cheir* (hand) and *praxis* (practice) to convey a type of treatment administered by hand. Central to chiropractic care, is the use of “hands-on therapy” in adjusting the spine. Chiropractic medicine is grounded in the belief that the relationship between the structure of the human body (primarily that of the spine) and its function affect our health. While spinal adjustment/manipulation is an integral healing modality in chiropractic care, chiropractors are known to offer other therapies as well. These include heat and ice, electrical stimulation, rehabilitative and general exercise, nutrition counseling, and may involve the use supplements. (*Chiropractic: In Depth*)

Chiropractic medicine is a four year long academic program that combines both classroom curriculum and hands-on experience working with patients. Students are educated in the biomedical sciences, as well as in public health and research methods. According to the National Center for Integrative health, chiropractic medicine “is regulated by each state and the District of Columbia. All states require completion of a Doctor of Chiropractic degree program
from a CCE-accredited college.” If they wish to, chiropractors may pursue a two to three year residency for education in a specific field. Most states require chiropractors to complete continuing education credits to maintain their license (Are Chiropractors Legitimate).

In the United States, chiropractic medicine is often perceived as a complementary therapy. According to the 2017 National Health Interview Survey (NHIS), “the use of chiropractic care by adults increased from 9.1 percent in 2012 to 10.3 percent in 2017. Among children, however, there was no significant difference in the use of chiropractic care during this same time period.” Additionally, an analysis of 2012 NHIS found that adults in the United States spent “$11.9 billion out-of-pocket on visits to complementary health practitioners—$3.9 billion of which was spent on visits to practitioners for chiropractic or osteopathic manipulation” (Chiropractic: In Depth). There is clearly a staggering amount of money being spent on alternative therapies. People are turning to alternative medicines as a complementary form of care.

Schneider also mentions that, “Chiropractors tend to have very high patient satisfaction rates.” He reports that, “from a public health perspective, we’d see a lot fewer unnecessary tests and hospitalizations and opioid prescriptions if people visited chiropractors for their back and neck pain” (Are Chiropractors Legitimate). Validating this claim, Brett Vaughn, published an article in the Journal of Osteopathic Medicine. He reported changes in pain levels and physical functioning in response to standard medical care versus chiropractic medical care. The results of this trial revealed that chiropractic care in conjunction with conventional medicine offers a significant advantage for decreasing pain and improving physical functioning when compared to standard medical treatment on its own. Indeed, it is becoming increasingly evident that
conventional medicine may benefit from using alternative therapies in the treatment of disease and illness.

While there are numerous alternative medicines, I’ve chosen to discuss aromatherapy as the closing form of holistic care in this paper. Aromatherapy is also known as Essential Oil therapy. The National Association for Holistic Aromatherapy (AHA) defines this form of medicine “as the art and science of utilizing naturally extracted aromatic essences from plants to balance, harmonize and promote the health of body, mind and spirit.” (What is Aromatherapy?). As an alternative medicine practice, aromatherapy can be seen as both preventative medicine and an active treatment to employ when treating illness.

The appeal in of aromatherapy is its simplicity and affordability. The fact that it is non-invasive is also a plus. The French perfumer and chemist, Rene- Maurice Gattefosse, is responsible for naming this alternative therapy. He coined the term “aromatherapie” in 1937 with the publication of a book titled, “Gattfosse’s Aromatherapy”. The book offered early clinical findings for utilizing essential oils for a range of physiological ailments. As the practice of aromatherapy has grown, it has adopted the same unifying approach most alternative medicines possess. It asserts its practice in the belief of treating the whole body, mind and spirit. To further illustrate, the AHA offers this message to those interested in aromatherapy:

“Aromatherapy seeks to unify physiological, psychological and spiritual processes to enhance an individual’s innate healing process.” (What is Aromatherapy?).

The National Association for Holistic Aromatherapy and the Alliance of International Aromatherapists are the two governing organizations for aromatherapy training in the United States. Listed on their websites, are a list of schools they choose to recognize as legitimate. These schools offer 200+ hour programs with a curriculum that has been approved by the two
organizations. While there aren’t many studies on aromatherapy, an article published by the National Library of Medicine and also by Oxford Journals, reported the effect of valerian, rose and lemon inhalation.

In the study, valerian and rose inhalation were found to “significantly prolong the pentobarbital sleep time, whereas lemon inhalation significantly shortened it.” Although valerian is widely known in the herbalism community as a natural alternative to conventional sleep aids, this study is the first medical report that states the inhalation of valerian may help in providing better quality sleep. Interestingly, the results may also suggest the possibility that lemon inhalation may cause a worsening of insomnia symptoms (The Sleep-Enhancing Effect). I believe it is imperative that more studies like this are done. Alternative medicine is so rich in history and knowledge - it may provide an incredible service within conventional medicine.

For this reason, we must educate ourselves further in alternative medicines. Standard medical care is being led by the pharmacology industry. While we are living longer due to said drugs, are we living better? Medicine has evolved to meet the demands of an era built upon instant gratification. While some drugs serve to quickly alleviate symptoms there are often disastrous and downright scary side effects that follow. I’m sure we can all attest to that truth. How often do we see commercials on television that advertise a certain drug – all the while swiftly stating the numerous side effects that come with it?

The National Public Radio (NPR) revealed on a Morning Edition show titled “Selling Sickness” that prescription drug spending is the third most expensive cost in our health care system. Spending seems to grow larger every year. Just last year, the average American received 12 prescriptions a year, as compared with 1992, when Americans got an average of seven
prescriptions (*Selling Sickness*). In a decade and a half, the use of prescription medication went up 71 percent! This has added about $180 billion to our medical spending.

The truth is, most medical schools don't teach disease prevention, proper diet or exercise as a part of health. Objective measures such as white blood cell counts, blood pressure readings, etc., are emphasized. However, physicians should place just as much emphasis in how their patient feels. Pain is treated as the enemy, when in actuality; pain is a symptom of something much bigger. Unfortunately, we are usually given prescription drugs that mask these symptoms or force it underground. Doctors should be looking at the cause of these manifestations, rather than the pain itself. Alternative medicine can offer several opportunities and pathways to healing, whereas conventional medicine may offer only one. Even so, I don’t believe that we should forgo standard medical care. Rather simply, alternative medicine is a tool we should be using alongside it.

My personal experience with traditional Chinese medicine offers a qualitative inquiry into the use of alternative therapies. It validates the inclusion of alternative medicine in the standard medical care community. Attached to this paper is an account of my experience under the care and treatment of a TCM practitioner. I hope to provide as much possible evidence to support the need for a partnership between conventional and alternative medicine.
A Qualitative Report on my Experience with TCM

On January 16, 2018, I sought medical care from a traditional Chinese practitioner. For months I had been dealing with severe digestive issues. I was unable to eat anything without feeling bloated. I also suffered from lethargy, insomnia, water retention, and a host of other symptoms. Initially, I looked towards physicians of conventional medicine for a diagnosis. Frustratingly, no one was able to tell me what was wrong. I was, however, given several drug prescriptions in an effort to treat the symptoms I presented with. I refused to take any of them. My biggest concern was that I would become dependent on these drugs. Rather than dealing with the root cause of my symptoms, they would serve as a “band-aid”. I wanted a proper treatment—one that would put me on the path to healing.

As a last effort, I looked into alternative therapies. Conventional medicine failed to provide answers and I was beginning to lose hope. After much research, I felt led to give traditional Chinese medicine a try. I read several online testimonials that reported success in treating digestive issues with TCM. As a result, I scheduled a consultation with a licensed practitioner of traditional Chinese medicine by the name of Aaron Hwang.

Mr. Hwang is the practitioner at Kwan Acupuncture & Herbs. He is a New York and California Board Certified and licensed acupuncturist and holds a masters degree in Traditional Oriental Medicine (MTOM) from the prestigious Pacific College of Oriental Medicine. His office is based in Westchester, NY.

I find it important to note, when I first called Mr. Hwang’s office he answered the phone. It was not a nurse or a receptionist - I spoke to him directly. He spent fifteen minutes listening to my story. Let me just say, I was flabbergasted. No doctor had every taken the time to listen to
me in such detail. Mr. Hwang suggested I come in for an initial consultation. For the first time in
months, I had a feeling of hope. Perhaps there was help out there, after all.

When the day finally came for my consultation, I was elated. When I got to his office, I
signed in and sat in the waiting room. There was meditative music playing as lavender essential
oil dispersed into the air from a diffuser in the corner. I felt a sense of peace – something I had
never felt sitting in a conventional doctor’s office. It wasn’t long before he came out and greeted
me. He shook my hand with such warmth and openness. I couldn’t help but feel at ease.

The consultation took about an hour. Mr. Hwang listened to my story once again. I felt as
though I were talking to a friend rather than a medical professional. He often smiled and
encouraged me to give more details. After half an hour of explaining my symptoms and
frustrations he told me that I was fortunate. He shared that my case was a simple one. We
would only need to evaluate my diet and make some changes. Thankfully, I was willing to give TCM a
chance.

Towards the end of the consultation, I was given an official diagnosis: “dampness”. In
Chinese medicine, dampness is considered to be the cause of many illnesses. It can be thought of
as a condition of high humidity inside the body. Symptoms can include a feeling of heaviness,
water retention, distended abdomen, gastric pain, phlegm discharge, etc. Individuals with a
dampness condition often have sluggish energy and easily gain weight. Interestingly, these were
all the symptoms I presented with.

Mr. Hwang asked me to keep a food journal and bring it to my next appointment. He then
gave me an outline of all that we had discussed. It reiterated all the foods I should incorporate
into my diet and all the foods to avoid. It also discussed lifestyle changes I should make. I was to
eat whole, unprocessed foods whenever possible. Warm, cooked, bland or sweet natured foods
were best. It was important to avoid overeating or undereating. Mr. Hwang also advised against drinking while eating, as it would water down digestive juices, inhibiting digestive function. He also prescribed ginger tea to build my digestive fire. He walked me through making the tea using the actual ginger root. I was also prescribed “geng mi”. Simply put, he told me to eat plain white rice. In TCM, white rice is very soothing to the digestive system. It is easy to digest and helps in moving undigested foods.  

After one month of implementing this new way of eating, my symptoms began disappearing. I was finally able to eat without the constant bloat that usually followed. My sleep and energy improved tremendously. Ancient Chinese wisdom states that food and lifestyle habits are nature’s first medicine. I now subscribe to this philosophy. While I still see my primary care physician and seek standard medical care when the occasion calls for it, I view alternative therapy as a form of preventative medicine. Traditional Chinese medicine changed my life. My personal experience powerfully argues for the inclusion of alternative medicine. Now is the time for a partnership between conventional and alternative medicine. There shouldn’t be an assumption that standard medical care, in its basic concepts, is complete. As I stated in the beginning of this paper, the greatest ally of today’s standard medical care is alternative medicine. This is the future of medicine.
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