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Reconsidering Alternative Medicine

By Laurie Hyland Robertson

A couple of years ago, my own physician sent me a hand-scrawled note along with some lab results that had turned out normal: "Hope you're feeling better!" No provider before or since has made such a gesture — I'd call it alternative practice, in fact — and it's one that really stuck with me.

But the majority of allopathic physicians would draw a Sharpie-thick line between my doctor's action and "alternative care." Why is this so? And does it really make sense for today's healthcare needs? Consider that nearly three-quarters of Americans have sought "alternative" medical treatment at some point in their lives. Odds are, most of those folks are also the patients of allopathic physicians — they're your patients. Clearly, they're seeking something they're not getting in more mainstream practices.

I see some providers automatically characterize the distinction between these care philosophies as "evidence-based medicine" versus "complementary and alternative medicine." Is a clear division even helpful in treating today's hyper-consumers (some of whom may, regardless of how misguided the notion, feel that they themselves have nearly as much expertise as their physicians)?

Maybe it's time to consider a new way of looking at these boundaries.

A few more questions to ponder: Given the standard painkiller-plus-muscle-relaxant prescription for back pain, is simple, supervised exercise an alternative treatment for a bad back? It's a cheap (and relatively effective) one, to be sure. But because it's alternative, in the sense of "not done very often by traditional physicians," does that make it suspect?

Physician rants against alternative medicine — as it's more typically defined — are pretty common on the message boards and online communities I have regularly trawled for *Physicians Practice*. Much of the vitriol falls into the category of opinion, and frankly, not a lot of the comments could be considered "evidence-based" under even the loosest definition of that term. As plenty of physician writers have noted, what constitutes evidence for one group — say, a young, male university student who is Caucasian taking part in a trial — isn't necessarily relevant to members of any other group, but the "evidence" is often applied as if it is. And a lack of such "evidence" is used frequently to condemn with broad strokes.

Granted, the pool of available patient dollars seems to dry up a little more each year. But wouldn't expanding the list of provider types to whom you refer benefit your patients? Are we really talking about a zero-sum game?

Maybe it's time to think about eliminating the bitter undertone of competition from discussions of patients' health choices.

Sure, the alternative medicine world has its quacks and charlatans. (As does allopathic medicine — consider the reproductive specialists who must've been involved in the infamous octuplet case.) So naturally, a heaping helping of due diligence is in order. As is undertaking your own education on available treatment options. Your patients will see other providers either way, so wouldn't you rather be in that loop, ensuring that the care they receive is legitimate?

It only makes sense to help patients get the most out of the time and money they're inclined to spend this way anyhow. A nonjudgmental attitude from you will also make them more likely to tell you when they're trying a new diet tea that could interact with the heart medication you so carefully prescribed.

Maybe it's time to stop resisting and start considering how alternative medicine can play a part alongside what you do.

Laurie Hyland Robertson is a former senior editor for *Physicians Practice*. She speaks nationally on practice management issues, and is also co-owner and manager of *Whole Chiropractic Healthcare*, in Odenton, Md. She can be reached via physicianspractice@cmpmedica.com.

A few books MDs and DOs might consider adding to their libraries, although they vary widely in utility and the level at which they address medical problems:

- *Encyclopedia of Natural Medicine, Revised Second Edition* (emphasis on prevention)
- *Alternative Medicine: The Definitive Guide* (2nd Edition) (includes wide

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