Conventional or alternative medicine? That is the question: whether in poor health to live or whole body radiance to achieve

By Daniela Schmidt

New drugs present greater hazards as well as greater potential benefits than ever before— for they are widely used, they are often very potent, and they are promoted by aggressive sales campaigns that may tend to overstate their merits and fail to indicate the risks involved in their use... There is no way of measuring the needless suffering, the money innocently squandered, and the protraction of illnesses resulting from the use of ineffective drugs.  John F. Kennedy, Consumers’ Protection Message of March 15, 1962 (qtd. in Wise Traditions, 17)

Although both conventional and alternative medicine aim at preventing and curing disease, they differ in their philosophy, treatments, effectiveness and cost, making it difficult for uninformed patients to choose between the two. Like the calomel of the old, today’s conventional treatments are expensive and, for the most part, ineffective in curing chronic illnesses. In America today degenerative diseases like heart disease, cancer, arthritis, multiple sclerosis, digestive disorders, diabetes, osteoporosis, Alzheimer’s, epilepsy, chronic fatigue, and other chronic conditions afflict half of our population and “cause three out of four deaths in the United States.” (Fallon, 1) Empirical research has shown that holistic approaches to chronic disease are very effective, while the advanced technologies of conventional medicine more effectively cure acute illness. However, the holistic approaches are virtually unknown to the general public, as they are not included in any official validation studies; unsuspecting patients are unable to make an educated decision regarding the best care for their specific illness.

Medicine is the art and science dealing with maintenance of health and prevention, alleviation, or cure of disease. (“Medicine”) As a result the distinction between conventional and alternative medicine comes from their philosophy, treatments, effectiveness and cost.

Conventional medicine, or biomedicine (Cook, 22) also called traditional Western medicine, or mainstream medicine, is a style of medical practice in which practitioners hold either a medical doctor degree or a doctor of osteopathy degree, is practiced in hospitals and taught in the U.S. medical schools. (Cook, 22)
Other terms, like allopathy, mainstream, and conventional have been used by different authors with the same meaning. Allopathy comes from Greek “allos” means other; “pathos” means disease or suffering, implying methods of treatment that attempt to cure disease and its cause directly. (Burton Goldberg Group, 6)

Conversely, alternative medicine, consists of “any method, technique, or practice for healing” (Navarra, 6) not encompassed by biomedicine, that has at its core the belief that “there is a mind-body connection that has an important impact on one’s ability to prevent illness, regain health, and create biopsychosocial balance.” (Navarra, 6) Alternative medicine is also defined in terms of holistic or integrative medicine.

**Philosophy:**

The philosophy behind mainstream medicine is doctor-centered (Cook, 10) where the doctor is the active, all-knowing participant in the health maintenance process, and the patient is the passive, submissive participant to the doctor’s advice. This medicine relies on advanced technology and medications to treat the symptoms, and not the cause of the disease. Biomedicine views the body as a machine (Marti, xi) without taking into account the relationship and conditioning of body, mind, emotions, social, and the environmental factors in the health maintenance process.

The philosophical underpinnings of the alternative medicine consists of the belief in the healing power of Nature (that men have the build-in power to heal), the Hipocratic principle to “First, do no harm,” and identifies and treats the cause of the illness, not merely its symptoms. (Marti, xii)

This is a patient-centered (Cook, 16) model of medicine, where not only the patient’s body is examined, but also the social, economic, and psychological conditions that refer to him/her. The physician, not only prescribes medication and treatment, but he/she also teaches the patient to maintain his/her health, as Adam Pelman, M.D. M.P.H. remarked:” (...) teaching patients to improve or maintain their health was part of medicine that often got lost in trying to provide patients with the latest advancements in order to diagnose, treat or cure disease.” (Navarra, ix)

**Treatments/remedies:**

Conventional medicine depends on a set of broadly defined symptomatic categories (Cook, 10) for which the doctor applies the standardized and often, the approved insurance treatment, addressing the symptoms, not the underlaying cause of disease. For instance: a patient with depression symptoms, without a previous history of depression, will be given the standardized treatment, usually a “serotonin reuptake inhibitor” Prozac, Paxil or Zoloft. (Cowan, 288)
The standard treatment is based on the premise that depression is a chemical imbalance, without giving any blood or hormone tests to the patient to discover the imbalance, as there are no such physical tests to diagnose depression. For as Elio J. Frattaroli, M.D. puts it:” PMS, depression, agrophobia, and other so-called psychiatric disorders, are not physical illnesses. (...) they are symptoms of a deeper mental illness that is both chemical and emotional. Like the physical symptoms of fever, cough, and pain, they are part of a healing process.” (www.eliofrattaroli.com) Therefore, in cases like these alternative treatment would be a more effective healing approach.

Similarly, fever is treated with either an over-the-counter drug, like ibuprofen to reduce it, and perhaps with an antibiotic, if there is an infection. In this case the antibiotic will most likely destroy the necessary gut flora, leading the patient to a Candida infection.

Alternative medicine, on the other hand, sees every patient as a unique set of body, mind, economic, and social organism, which needs an individual treatment. Disease is viewed as one or more imbalances in the patient, bacteria not being the necessary cause of all disease.

Going back to the previous depression example: alternative medicine would start from the premise that the causes of depression are not necessarily physical, maybe the cause is situational, and this in turn affects the emotions of the patient. In this case the patient is encouraged to focus on his/her inner life, and activities that “encourage more flow in (...) emotions like taking walks, writing in a journal, listening to music, eating foods that the patient particularly enjoys, or cooking a special dish.” (Cowan, 291) The alternative practitioner might also recommend an integrative approach to depression: the use of St. John’s Wort to correct the chemical imbalance, and probably will counsel the patient to reflect on his sadness, and take appropriate action. (Moore, 150-152)

One of the many classifications of alternative medical practices includes: Diet, Nutrition and Lifestyle changes, Mind/body control, Manual healing, and Herbal medicine. (Cook, 3) The typical alternative medicine practitioner would use some or all of the above methods that fit the particular patient, to treat depression. A fever patient will be encouraged to stay in bed and increase the fever to kill bacteria naturally. In case of infection, the doctor will likely prescribe a homeopathic medicine, “A substance that cause similar effects as the symptoms of the disease.” (“Homeopathy and Allopathy”)

Another important aspect distinguishing conventional from alternative medicine is the length of a doctor visit: a visit to a conventional medical office lasts at most 10 minutes, which is not enough time for the patient’s examination, let alone to properly diagnose and treat a condition. In contrast, a visit to an alternative doctor lasts between one and two hours, and the doctor-patient relationship is one of cooperation and exchange of information to cure the disease. The
antechamber waiting time is half an hour to one hour for the conventional doctor and 5-10 minutes to see the alternative doctor.

Effectiveness

Several decades ago, however, consumer confidence in conventional medicine began to show some signs of waning. Reports emerged on the side effects and inadequacies of widely used drugs, and new strains of bacteria suddenly appeared that were resistant to the first “magic bullet” antibiotics. The use of new, more powerful antibiotics eventually resulted in microbes that could thwart them, too. Meanwhile, cures for arthritis, allergies, hypertension, cancer depression, cardiovascular disease, digestive problems, and other chronic conditions (...) eluded the best minds of biomedicine. (Cook, 9)

As public confidence in conventional medicine faltered, in 1997 there was a 20% increase since 1990 in visits to alternative practitioners; more visits than to the U.S. primary care physicians. (Navarra, xi) Also in 1997 in the U.S. 27 billion dollars was spent annually on alternative medicine. (Navarra, xi) A 1998 Stanford study found that 69% of Americans use some form of unconventional medical therapies, 67% of HMOs cover a few forms of alternative medicine, 60% of physicians refer their patients to alternative therapy, and 70% of family doctors desire training in alternative medical practices. (Navarra, xix) In 2002 Complementary Alternative Medicine (CAM) was used by 149 million people, with 123 million using it for the first time in the past 12 months. (U.S. national Center for Health Statistics, no. 343) Furthermore, the health services and supplies per capita for alternative medicine in 1990 were 71 million dollars, and raised in 2004 to 273 million dollars. (U.S. Census Bureau, Health Expenditure Data) These statistics clearly show that alternative medicine practices are more effective than mainstream medicine, as the consumers will not choose them if they were not happy with the results.

However, there is no formal research available as to the effectiveness of alternative medicine practices, as most of its practitioners are clinicians, not researchers, and they can only report from their experience with their patients. Their data is empirical, not validated by use of generally accepted methods of effectiveness of a treatment. (Navarra, xvii) For instance, one alternative doctor reported that the same treatment for re-occurring ear infections in infants, yielded different results: the infant with a calm mother cleared the infection, while the one with an anxious mother kept getting them. (Cowan, 1) Although the formal research showing the effectiveness of alternative medicine is missing, the rise in patients seeking alternative medicine practices shows clearly first that the patients are not basing their decisions on validated effectiveness statistics, but they experience themselves what treatment best works
for them, and secondly, that patients see the alternative medicine more effective than the conventional, as they keep returning to it, especially if suffering of a chronic disease.

In our depression example above, the treatment with Paxil, Prozac or Zoloft will temporarily alleviate the symptoms, but the patient will still experience a sad and swinging mood, and the side effects of Prozac, Paxil, or Zoloft: dependence, blurry mind, lack of libido, gastrointestinal disturbance, somnolence, headache, insomnia, sexual dysfunction and suicidal tendencies, all in effect decreasing patient’s quality of life. (www.drugs.com) St. John’s Wort also has some side effects, like restlessness, insomnia, anxiety, dizziness and headache, but it can be used as a herbal tea, or as a spice, with no side effects. (St_John’s_Wort#use_as_spice) In Germany it is used to treat major depression with very good results. (Wikipedia)

Cost

As far as cost is concerned, a visit to either a conventional or alternative doctor costs the same: about $200. Some visits to alternative doctors are not covered by medical insurances, and they might seem more expensive. Laboratory tests for diagnosis and treatment have the same price, but sometimes, if prescribed by an alternative doctor, the insurance might deny coverage, motivating that the test is not medically necessary. A number of alternative treatments like PT, craniosacral, acupuncture, and chiropractic, are covered by insurance by mandate in 11 American states. (Navarra, xix)

The medications are regulated by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA). FDA oversees distribution, development and marketing of new medicines, foods and vitamins that make a therapeutic claim. (Cook, 17-18) This process is very expensive. “It can take up to 10 years and cost hundreds of millions of dollars to obtain FDA approval for a new drug. These astronomical costs are beyond the reach of all but a few corporations and can be recouped only by exercising the legal 17-year monopolies conferred by the U.S. patent laws. With a patent, drug companies can and do charge whatever the market will bear.” (Cook, 18)

In contrast, there is no incentive for pharmaceutical companies to research and develop alternative therapies/medicines, since a natural substance cannot be patented, and consequently alternative medications fall prey to this formal validation process. (Cook, 18-19) For instance, Zoloft costs $98 (Burton Goldberg Group, 19) and is not covered by all insurances. The price of Paxil ranges from $54 to $102 (www.coreynahman.com) and Prozac ranges from $89 to $179. (www.coreynahman.com) St. John Wort cost ranges between $10.66 and $19.95. (www.wholehealth.com) The quince/lemon anti-allergy spray costs $15, while the Fluticasone Roxan costs $55 (generic), and both are similarly effective against hay fever; additionally, the lemon-quince spray does not have the side effects of the steroids in Fluticasone.

It is obvious that alternative medicines are less expensive than the conventional ones, partly because they do not have to go through the expensive FDA approval process, and they do not
fall under any company’s patent monopoly. As seen above, at least as far as alternative depression medications are concerned, they are more effective and don’t seem to create dependence or have suicidal side effects. Furthermore, transcendental meditation, breathing exercises, yoga and other emotion-control practices can be learned and be practiced at home at a fraction of the regular marriage therapy costs. (www.skepdic.com)

In light of these economic and policy considerations, a question still remains: “How much is it costing us to make symptoms like this (PMS, depression, agrophobia, and other so-called psychiatric disorders) go away while pretending they are not about anything? What price are we paying to have a chemically liberated nation of happy shoppers and successful compliant children? In monetary terms the price of Prozac is going down. In human terms it has never been higher.” (Fratternolli, web comment)

Although conventional medicine is costly and ineffective with chronic disease, its advanced technology and treatments are most effective in cases of acute illness like trauma, extremely high fever, and trouble breathing. (Wise Traditions, 36)

New studies to validate alternative treatments for chronic diseases and their use by the conventional doctors would better inform and benefit the patients suffering from chronic illnesses. Patient welfare depends heavily on whether there is freely available medical information, as Keats said: “Knowledge enormous makes a god of me.” (qtd. in Cowan, 287)

Informed patients would choose a holistic practitioner that uses a combination of biomedicine with certain validated alternative treatments, in an office where the patient is examined by a conventional doctor; however, the treatment, depending on the condition, combines acupuncture, nutrition, a clinical herbalist, and a mind-body practitioner. (Navarra, xi)

Conventional or alternative medicine? The answer could be the marriage between modern medical inventions and the holistic medical ways: the partnership will transform our era into a Golden Age, “divorce hastens the physical degeneration of the human race.” (Fallon, xii)
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St. John’s Wort. Viewed on 9/10/08 on http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St_John's_Wort#use_as_spice


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