

Integrative Medicine: An Evolving Process (Sept. 2004)

This is a significant period in the development of contemporary medicine, as many forces merge together. The evolving integration of conventional medicine and alternative approaches to healing can provide innovative and effective solutions for both practitioners and those they serve. Let's review some of the aspects of this evolving process, and consider where the journey might lead.

For the purpose of this article, we first define some terms. Integrative medicine means the combining of conventional medicine and alternative approaches to healing. We refer to conventional, western, or allopathic medicine as what is most common in the United States at this time. Alternative approaches cover a wide range of healing modalities outside of the conventional mainstream. The terms holistic and complimentary are typically applied to either alternative approaches, or to approaches that are involved in some way with more conventional treatments. Another related term is traditional medicine, which we view as representing age old healing practices, often from various cultures like Oriental medicine or Native American healing techniques. Currently, traditional modalities are also being used in a complementary way with conventional medical approaches.

Pioneers establish new concepts

Looking at some early pioneers of this evolving journey, we can see an increase of developments since 1970. In 1974, David Bressler, Ph.D. created the Center for Integral Medicine at UCLA, where health professionals were introduced to the new concepts of alternative and holistic medicine. At the same time, Delores Krieger, Ph.D. began teaching Therapeutic Touch at New York University Nursing School and to nurses across the country. This enabled an ancient modality to be practiced in hospitals nationwide. During the same period, Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, MD revolutionized concepts of death and dying for the medical profession. Another major contributor during this early fertile period was Hans Selye, MD, who provided critical research on stress as a significant factor in the disease process. Acceptance of the integrative approach in medical practices was beginning to take root.

Many dimensions of this integrative medicine movement have been further cultivated since that early period. The pioneers of that time opened the door to understanding the vital importance of the healing powers within the individual. In current times, we continue to move away from the focus on identifying symptoms and treating disease as something separate from the individual. It is becoming recognized in the best medical research that patients do have innate self-healing capabilities. Modalities such as meditation and biofeedback are excellent demonstrations of the transformative effect that the mind and body can have on one another. In a variety of disease states, factors such as emotions, attitudes and spiritual beliefs become important forces in healing. With this, we are moving towards respect for the interconnectedness of all parts, and the integrity of the whole person as a system.

Dr. Joan Borysenko, Ph.D. and author of *The Power of the Mind to Heal* is a current leader in the field. She refers to the need to find healthcare practitioners who recognize this new terrain, and can help us select the best options among many unfamiliar choices. It helps to have a good map.

Focus on individual empowerment

Another significant aspect of the movement toward integrative medicine is well described by pioneer, Larry Dossey, MD. Dr. Dossey is an internist and author of many books, most recently *The Future of Medicine*. In over 20 years of well-respected research, Dr. Dossey often emphasizes the importance of consciousness and spirituality on one's health. He proposes that the role of spirituality in our medical care system is our next frontier.

Additionally, the alternative/holistic approach is enriching mainstream medicine by emphasizing the participation of the patient in the healing process. Trust and communication between the health practitioner and patient are increasingly valued as a crucial aspect of successful healing. This new focus on the empowerment of the individual encourages increased self-awareness and consciousness. This creates a more expanded perspective of the meaning of illness. Individuals can learn to explore symptoms as messengers and indicators rather than invaders.

We have described some of the many facets of the expanding new model of integrative medicine. It can be said that we are currently at a critical time for change in this field. Recent developments in science not only expose the limitations of western medicine, but they often support the integration of alternative approaches into the mainstream. What are our next steps in this journey? How do we create a more integrative approach to medicine?

Need to transcend differences

Abundant scientific evidence shows us that strengthening the immune system and working with patients' stress factors can effectively treat, and often prevent disease. It is commonly acknowledged that at least 70% of diseases in our country relate directly to the body or mind's reaction to chronic stress. These are some of the areas which conventional medicine often does not address. Alternative and holistic approaches are focused on assisting the patient to vitalize the immune system, enhance the healing potential of their mind and body, and create balance in their lives. An increase of research regarding alternative and complimentary approaches, and more sharing of research between disciplines would be a significant step toward a more integrated medical system.

There are currently many perspectives among the conventional medical profession and those in the alternative healing field that are in disagreement with one another regarding what creates and promotes health. If the view of one group dominates, as is presently the case, real and sometimes superior options can be overlooked. Truly integrative healthcare must honor a model where differing views carry equal weight. Academics have called this a polycentric model of healthcare. A polycentric model transcends the differences among modalities and focuses, rather, on the best that each approach has to offer for each patient's individual situation. By not denying the fullness of all of our resources we can focus on what works.

There is turmoil and dissatisfaction in the conventional medical field at this time, among both those receiving services and those working in the medical field. Nurses, and even doctors, are leaving the profession. The health care delivery system, with complexities created by laborious health insurance plans, impersonal hospital corporations, and the heavy handed influence of pharmaceutical companies, can often seem like an unchangeable force.

Research exchange is key to integrated model

Despite obstacles that might be experienced while looking for options in the conventional medicine system, individuals increasingly continue to ask for holistic and complimentary approaches to be integrated into their medical treatment. As research continues to show benefits, as success stories, word of mouth, and the natural process of change moves forward, it is possible for individuals to learn more about their choices, participate in their health care more fully, and gain easier access to an integrated approach to treatment.

There are many ways to create increased dialogue, understanding and flexibility among the diverse participants in this process. A willingness to respectfully exchange support and information, including research between conventional medical practitioners, alternative/holistic therapists, individual clients, and the public at large can accomplish much toward bringing various therapeutic disciplines toward more common ground. Step by step, a healthy and integrated system will emerge as an educated public demands more inclusive medical approaches.

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