

Take Two Ginger Root and Call Me In The Morning

By Kauthar B. Umar, MA

Closing the Gap, First Summit Packs the House • January/February 2003

“Do you know why people still keep going to curanderas and curanderos, (spiritual healers),?” asked Elena Avila, RN, MSN, Curandera. “Because it works, that’s why. It works.”

In the United States, complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) is becoming a specialty, with racial and ethnic minorities representing a large portion of its consumers. Avila, a spiritual healer for 25 years, says Curanderismo—a blend of African, Spanish, and indigenous medicine and medical techniques—is used among minority communities in the United States, frequently alongside western medicine.

“I don’t treat a diagnosis. I treat the person,” said Avila. “You might come to me and maybe you wanted me to give you a magic herb for your diabetes. Then you discover I don’t have that, but I’ll help you with your nutrition. I’ll educate you. I’ll refer you to a physician. I have forty apprentices, most of them nurses, doctors, and massage therapists, with this idea of being inclusive,” stressed Avila. “I have one apprentice who is a doctor of oriental medicine, she’s a registered nurse, and now she’s an apprentice in Curandismo. I think that is our future.”

For years, CAM has been misunderstood and rejected by practitioners of conventional medicine in the U.S. However, within the past decade it has grown in popularity among the American public and medical community, although skeptics remain. Today, many untested CAM treatments that aren’t used in hospitals or reimbursed by medical insurance companies are widely used by patients without their physician’s knowledge.

In a 1998 *Journal of the American Medical Association*, article “Trends In Alternative Medicine Use in the United States 1990-1997 Results Of A Follow-up National Study,” Dr. David Eisenberg, of the Center for Alternative Medicine Research and Education, Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, reported that 40 percent of Americans used CAM, although 60 percent of the time patients didn’t inform their physicians.

Many patients opt not to disclose use of CAM to their physicians out of fear of embarrassment. Physicians, often reluctant to advise patients about CAM, either lack knowledge or believe it to be “witchcraft” and disregard it. Harmful side effects may occur if CAM is misused, and dangerous drug interactions can occur when combining certain CAM treatments with conventional medicine. Practitioners say this can be avoided with proper medical regulations.

“Caribbean people living in urban areas in the United States, feeling physically removed from their native culture, will turn to traditional health remedies from their culture, just as everyone else does from different ethnic groups,” said Jacqueline A. Watson, DO, MBA,

of Health Concepts International, a health care management and consulting firm in Washington, D.C. “Providers must therefore enhance their communication with diverse populations and acquire the basic knowledge to understand culturally influenced health behavior.”

Incorporating CAM

Acquiring knowledge of culturally influenced health behavior is easier said than done. The lack of communication between health practitioners and patients who use CAM presents difficulty in assessing patients needs, argued Dr. John C. Pan, clinical professor and director of the Center for Integrative Medicine at George Washington University Medical Center. Dr. Pan stressed the need for cultural sensitivity and praised an ongoing study of limited-English-proficient Asian American patients of Chinese and Vietnamese descent in community health clinics nationwide.

Supported by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, this study is in the process of developing a questionnaire for use in evaluating the quality of health care provided to Asian Americans of Chinese and Vietnamese descent. According to Dr. Pan, research shows that many traditional healing practices present barriers to quality care, especially if providers lack sensitivity to these concerns, or are simply unfamiliar with CAM.

“The questionnaire is culturally sensitive. It deals with cultural health beliefs and practices and it’s very important,” said Dr. Pan. “In the practice of traditional Chinese medicine, one of the common things is the belief that health reflects the balance of yin and yang, hot and cold elements, within the body. The traditional custom of rubbing the body with oil and a coin to release the cold element may result in a lot of bruises. When you don’t understand it you think there’s some abuse going on. These are the things to which health providers need to be sensitive. So, these are the things that will be incorporated in this questionnaire.”

In an attempt to successfully integrate traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) into the U.S. medical system, NIH’s National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, the University of Maryland, and the Health and Welfare Bureau of the Government of Hong Kong’s Special Administrative Region co-sponsored the workshop, “Enhancing the Evidence Base for Traditional Chinese Medicine—Practice Methodology and Grantsmanship,” in Hong Kong. Held October 30-31, 2002, the workshop created a forum to encourage further investigation and consolidated the evidence base for TCM as well as impacted the future of patient care and policy.

Panelists agree that CAM’s legacy will continue to grow in the U.S., and the medical community must come to terms with this reality and embrace the challenge. Health professionals must become more culturally competent and this can begin in medical schools with the help of CAM experts from various ethnic

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communities. CAM practitioners believe, alongside conventional medicine, alternative medicine should be acknowledged and researched by the medical community to eliminate health disparities and ensure patients safety.

“We need to engage the traditional practices out there and we need to create a dialogue to tear down the wall between the practitioners and patients,” said Dr. Pan. “We need to understand what herbs people are taking, and go from there.”

For more information, contact the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine Clearinghouse at 888-644-6226 or go to <http://nccam.nih.gov/> or e-mail nccamc@altmedinfo.org ❖

