

Conventional and Unconventional Medical Practice

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Introduction

Many people use unconventional (also referred to as alternative, complementary, integrative) therapies for health problems, but the extent of this use and the costs are relatively unknown. Eisenberg and his group conducted a national telephone survey to determine the prevalence, costs, and patterns of use of complementary therapies, such as acupuncture and chiropractic.¹ He limited the treatments studied to 16 commonly used interventions neither taught widely in U.S. medical schools nor generally available in U.S. hospitals (Table 1, p.79). He completed telephone interviews with 1539 adults (response rate, 67%) in a national sample of adults 18 years of age or older in 1990.

One in three respondents (34%) reported using at least one alternative therapy in the past year, and a third of these saw providers for integrative treatment. The latter group had made an average of 19 visits to such therapists during the preceding year, with an average charge per visit of \$27.60. The frequency of use of complementary care varied somewhat among sociodemographic groups, with the highest use reported by nonblack persons from 25 to 49 years of age who had relatively more education and higher incomes. The majority used unconventional therapy for chronic, as opposed to life threatening, medical conditions.

Extrapolation to the U.S. population suggests that in 1990 Americans made an estimated 425 million visits to providers of alternative therapy. This number exceeds the number of visits to all U.S. primary care doctors (388 million). Expenditures associated with use of integrative treatment in 1990 amounted to approximately 13.7 billion, three

quarters of which (\$10.3 billion) was paid out of pocket.

The frequency of use of complementary therapy in the United States is far higher than previously reported.

Table 2 (p.80) summarizes the rates of use of unconventional treatment for the ten most common principal medical conditions. On average, one in four respondents (25%) used alternative therapy and one in ten (10%) went to a provider of complementary treatment for a principal medical condition in 1990. Among all the conditions studied, the frequency of use of unconventional therapy was highest for back problems (36%), anxiety (28%), headaches (27%), chronic pain (26%) and cancer or tumors (24%). Relaxation techniques, chiropractic, and massage were the alternative treatments used most often in 1990.

Almost nine of ten respondents (89%) who saw a provider of unconventional therapy in 1990 did so without the recommendation of their medical doctor.

The Diehl Report

In 1997, the Clayton College of Natural Health conducted a survey of unconventional therapy as part of their training program. In the course of their investigation, a series of letters was sent to alternative agencies such as naturopaths, homeopaths and herbalogists. Most of the organizations simply sent irrelevant material, for example, the date of the next meeting of the society. Only one of the group, The American Academy of Medical Acupuncture, sent an article describing and published by their organization.² It would be well to review this article and see the differences between conventional and unconventional medicine as judged by an integrative group. The demographics are very close to the Eisenberg study. Most of the physi-

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Table 1. Prevalence and frequency of use of unconventional therapy among 1539 adult respondents in 1990.

Type of therapy	Used in past 12 months (%)*	Saw a provider (%)*	Mean number of visits per user in past 12 months
relaxation techniques	13	9	19
chiropractic	10	70	13
massage	7	41	15
imagery	4	15	14
spiritual healing	4	9	14
commercial weight-loss programs	4	24	23
lifestyle diets (e.g., macrobiotics)	4	13	8
herbal medicine	3	10	8
megavitamin therapy	2	12	13
self-help groups	2	38	21
energy healing	1	32	8
biofeedback	1	21	6
hypnosis	1	52	3
homeopathy	1	32	6
acupuncture	<1	91	38
folk remedies	<1	0	0
exercise**	26	-	-
prayer**	25	-	-
≥1 unconventional therapy***	34	36	19
95% confidence interval	31-37	31-41	14-24

* percentages are of those who used that type of unconventional therapy.

** respondents who used exercise or prayer were not asked for details about this use.

*** excluding exercise and prayer.

cians surveyed were in private practice, either a solo or group practice. The majority of respondents were generalists (general practice, family practice, internal medicine). Essentially every type of practice was represented, although the number of surgeons (including specialty surgeons), obstetricians/gynecologists, and psychiatrists was small.

Table 3 (p.81) shows a variety of complementary healing methods used or endorsed by the respondents. The more common alternative modalities that were sanctioned (physician either used the modality

or referred patients for it) included manipulative medicine (60%), nutritional supplements (59%), herbal medicine (54%) and homeopathy (49%).

Practitioner's subjective evaluation of efficacy of acupuncture for the most commonly treated problems is listed in Table 4 (p.81). Musculoskeletal problems were treated by the largest percentage of respondents, compared with other general medical conditions. The most common disorder managed (low back pain) also had the highest success factor.

In addition, these doctors were given

Table 2. Use of unconventional therapy for the 10 most frequently reported principal medical conditions.

condition	percent reporting condition	used unconventional therapy in past 12 mo*	saw provider in past 12 mo*	therapies most commonly used
back problems	20	36	19	chiropractic, massage
allergies	16	9	3	spiritual healing, lifestyle diet
arthritis	16	18	7	chiropractic, relaxation techniques
insomnia	14	20	4	relaxation techniques, imagery
sprains or strains	13	22	10	relaxation techniques, massage
headache	13	27	6	relaxation techniques, chiropractic
high blood pressure	11	11	3	relaxation techniques, homeopathy
digestive problems	10	13	4	relaxation techniques, megavitamins
anxiety	10	28	6	relaxation techniques, imagery
depression	8	20	7	relaxation techniques, self-help groups
10 most common	73	25	10	relaxation techniques, chiropractic, massage

*percentages are of those who reported the condition. "Provider" denotes a provider of unconventional therapy.

the opportunity to enter free-text regarding why they perform acupuncture. They could give more than one reason. The most common statement made (91 respondents) was efficacy of the treatment; many physicians simply said, "It works." The next most common explanation (76 doctors) was that it was used because the standard medical approach was inadequate, prompting use of the alternative modality of acupuncture. Fifty-three practitioners stated that they used it for pain management. Complete results are given in Table 5 (p.82).

Summary and Conclusions

Eisenberg and his group found that unconventional medicine has an enormous presence in the U.S. health care system. An estimated one in three persons in the U.S. adult population used alternative treatment in 1990. However, little is known and little has been said about the merits of American physicians who currently practice complementary medicine or the practitioners perception of the efficacy of such therapy. He indicated that in a subsequent paper this matter would be discussed.

Table 3. Respondents' use or referral for complementary health care methods (n=312).

complementary method	use or refer		use or refer	
	number	percent	number	percent
manipulation	102	33.1	185	60.1
supplements	161	52.3	181	58.8
herbal medicine	138	44.8	166	53.9
homeopathy	106	34.4	151	49.0

Table 4. Percent of respondents that use acupuncture for various conditions, and respondents' subjective evaluation of acupuncture's efficacy for each condition (N=312).

condition	percent of respondents who used acupuncture to treat each condition	subjective evaluation of efficacy (%)		
		ineffective/uncertain	somewhat effective	very effective
common conditions*				
low-back pain	93.2	2.0	39.0	58.9
myofascial pain	91.6	3.9	39.7	56.4
simple headache	89.3	5.5	31.3	63.3
sciatica	88.6	5.5	44.3	50.2
shoulder problems	88.3	5.5	46.2	41.6
tennis elbow	85.1	12.3	46.2	41.6
migraine headache	84.7	10.0	53.3	36.8
osteoarthritis of knee	81.8	15.1	46.8	38.1
whiplash	81.2	6.8	47.2	46.0
ankle sprain	76.0	11.2	32.5	56.4
osteoarthritis of hip	76.0	19.3	52.1	28.6
other conditions**				
chronic sinusitis	69.2	11.2	49.3	39.4
gastrointestinal disorders	65.9	16.3	52.2	31.5
smoking cessation	62.7	21.7	50.3	28.0
perimenstrual symptoms	61.0	11.1	45.7	43.1

*conditions mentioned by at least 75% of respondents.

** Selected from 11 conditions: common cold, digestive disorders, asthma/ bronchitis, chronic sinusitis, herpes zoster/post-herpetic neuralgia, perimenstrual symptoms, menstrual irregularity, fertility (male and female), smoking cessation, drug detoxification, and weight reduction.

Table 5. Responses to the open-ended question: "Why do you perform acupuncture?"

number (%) of respondents	response
91 (30)	Efficacy: "It works."
76 (25)	The standard medical approach is inadequate for many problems; I use it in cases of failed Western therapy.
53 (17)	for pain management
41 (13)	It is an adjunctive treatment to standard therapy.
36 (12)	It offers a multi-dimensional ("body-mind-spirit") or holistic approach to medical care.
34 (11)	Patients request it or like it.
27 (9)	It is safe; or, it is safer than Western therapy.
17 (6)	It allows avoidance of pharmaceuticals with their attendant problems.
13 (4)	Acupuncture provides professional satisfaction; it is fun to do and it is personally rewarding
9 (3)	It is a cost-effective mode of therapy.
5 (2)	I use it as a "last-ditch" therapeutic option.
2 (1)	It provides extra income or earning power in my practice.

Respondents could give free-text answers, and many listed more than one reason. The number of respondents that gave each answer is listed.

Diehl and his cohorts, in their recent survey, found that physicians who incorporate acupuncture into their practice do so mainly to treat pain problems which have been unsuccessful with conventional methods. They found that the doctors are also more likely to use or endorse other complementary modalities.

We quote Diehl's work because it is the only quantitative accounting of the ef-

forts of conventional doctors using a non-conventional medium that we could find.

References

1. Eisenberg DM, Kessler RC, Foster C, et al: Unconventional medicine in the United States *NEJM*, 328: #4, 246-252, 28 January 1993.
2. Diehl DL, Kaplan G, Coulter I, et al: Use of acupuncture by American physicians *J Altern Compl Med*, 3: #2, 119-126, 1997.