

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

**PHYSICIANS' PERSONAL AND PRACTICE
 USE OF CAM THERAPIES IN A RURAL
 COMMUNITY IN THE SOUTHEAST
 UNITED STATES**

Dear Editor:

Because complementary and alternative medical (CAM) therapy consumption is increasing in the United States¹ and integration into conventional healthcare is foreseeable, CAM should be studied from the practitioners' perspective. Previous surveys of healthcare workers in Hawaii and Vermont have found moderate support for CAM in conventional medical practice, especially relaxation techniques, massage, mind-body therapies, biofeedback, spiritual therapies, and

health promotion (HP).^{1,2} The present research was the third study of practitioners' opinions of CAM in the United States. Physicians were surveyed concerning their personal/practice use and willingness to refer patients for CAM. Twenty-one (21) medical providers (17 men; 4 women, 52% primary care; 48% specialty care) affiliated with a 117-bed, rural, southeastern hospital participated in a structured interview survey about HP and CAM services from the NCCAM Website.⁴

Practitioners were asked what percentage of relevant patients they would refer for CAM if a local resource were available (Table 1), resulting in unanimous referral for patients who smoked, had mental health issues, and needed exercise, nutrition, or weight management services. Table 1

TABLE 1. ASSESSMENT OF CAM AND POTENTIAL PATIENT REFERRALS IF A RESOURCE WAS AVAILABLE

| <i>CAM therapy or health behavior</i> | <i>Modal percentage of practitioner's reported referral for relevant patients</i> | <i>Mean percentage of practitioner's reported referral for relevant patients</i> | <i>Mean percentage who assess in their patients</i> |
|---------------------------------------|---|--|---|
| Smoking | 100 | 66.1 | 100 |
| Mental health | 100 | 58.4 | 71.4 |
| Nutrition | 100 | 54.1 | 90.5 |
| Exercise | 100 | 42.4 | 81 |
| Weight management | 100 | 41.2 | 81 |
| Non-medical pain management | 0 | 35.3 | 0 |
| Physical therapy | 0 | 33.1 | 0 |
| Dietary supplements | 0 | 27.9 | 85.7 |
| Medical pain management | 0 | 26.5 | 85.7 |
| Herbals supplements | 0 | 23.5 | 81 |
| Massage | 0 | 19.8 | 0 |
| Relaxation | 0 | 14.6 | 38.1 |
| Pastoral care | 0 | 9.95 | 0 |
| Chiropractic | 0 | 8.4 | 0 |
| Faith community | 0 | 7 | 38.1 |
| Naturopathic | 0 | 5.6 | 23.8 |
| Spiritual direction | 0 | 5.5 | 0 |
| Other stress management | 0 | 5.1 | 19 |
| Traditional Chinese Medicine | 0 | 3.4 | 33.3 |
| Creative arts | 0 | 1.24 | 0 |
| Prayer | 0 | 0.62 | 19 |
| Ayurveda | 0 | 0.52 | 14.3 |
| Energy therapies | 0 | 0.38 | 0 |
| Homeopathic | 0 | 0.33 | |
| Faith ritual | 0 | 0.1 | |

also shows the percent assessing CAM in their patients, with more consideration of HP than other CAM.

Chi-square analyses found primary care practitioners showed more potential referrals than specialists for exercise, $\chi^2 (N = 21) = 11.6, p = 0.001$, weight management, $\chi^2 (N = 21) = 4.4, p = 0.037$, nonmedical pain management, $\chi^2 (N = 21) = 5.8, p = 0.016$, physical therapy, $\chi^2 (N = 21) = 6.7, p = 0.010$, herbal supplements, $\chi^2 (N = 21) = 4.0, p = 0.046$, and pastoral care, $\chi^2 (N = 21) = 4.1, p = 0.042$.

Chi-square comparisons on potential referrals for practitioners who personally used HP/CAM compared to those who did not found those using physical therapy, $\chi^2 (N = 21) = 6.7, p = 0.010$, herbal supplements, $\chi^2 (N = 21) = 4.0, p = 0.046$, and pastoral care, $\chi^2 (N = 21) = 4.1, p = 0.042$, were more likely to consider referring patients for these services.

Overall results suggested strong support of HP proven successful in medical patients for smoking cessation,⁵ exercise promotion,⁶ dietary counseling,⁷ and for weight/diabetes management.⁸ Although HP may not be very alternative, it is not mainstream medicine. Given the potential cost-offset,⁹ healthcare administrators need to promote integration of HP into the healthcare system. These practitioners reported regular assessment/referral for mental health services, yet there was frustration that patients would decline outside consultation. Referrals to mental health services outside of medical care often result in lack of treatment.¹⁰ Because integration of psychological services would treat more patients, improve care, and provide cost offset,⁹ healthcare should consider more integration of mind-body services, since this artificial separation is outdated and erroneous.

Although primary care providers are no longer the exclusive gatekeepers of healthcare, especially HP/CAM services,¹ they were more open than medical specialists for several services. Perhaps this is a function of patient demand, but may also indicate more openness within the medical setting for more of a bio-psycho-social-spiritual model of practice.

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