

JANUARY 2008

**COMPLE-
MENTARY
MEDICINE**

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DEBATING MATTERS
TOPIC
GUIDES

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MOTION:

**“COMPLEMENTARY
AND ALTERNATIVE
MEDICINE SHOULD
NOT BE AVAILABLE
ON THE NHS”**

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KEY TERMS

- [Complementary and alternative medicine \(CAM\)](#)
- [Holistic medicine](#)
- [Homeopathy](#)
- [Integrated or integrative medicine](#)
- [Placebo effect](#)
- [Randomised controlled trial](#)
- [Scientific or evidence-based medicine](#)

INTRODUCTION

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NOTES

In May 2006 a group of scientists and doctors led by Professor Michael Baum wrote a letter calling on the NHS to stop providing complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) [Ref: [Times Online](#)]. A further letter a year later restated their case [Ref: [Times Online](#)]. Their campaign provoked an outcry from complementary medicine groups, and the Prince of Wales joined those who hit back [Ref: [Times Online](#)]. Accusations of state-funded ‘witchcraft’ were met by criticism of the arrogant superiority of doctors. Both sides agree that because the NHS is funded by taxpayers, and the treatments it provides are generally free at the point of delivery, the NHS should be accountable for the way it spends its money. But while CAM’s supporters see its provision as a question of health freedom and fairness, ensuring it’s not just available to those who can pay for it privately, its detractors say it’s a scandal that public money is being wasted on untested and unproven treatments. The NHS provides around 10 per cent of complementary services in the UK [Ref: [BBC Health](#)], and a survey of local primary care trusts in England found around two-thirds offered complementary medicine services. One reason that CAM might be attractive to the NHS is that it is claimed to be cheaper than conventional treatments. CAM is also popular, and in a system in which patients are increasingly seen as consumers with a right to choose their treatments it might seem only right that they should be able to choose CAM. In response to a petition asking for CAM to be provided alongside conventional medicine, the government has said this is up to primary care trusts, but that in providing local services trusts could explore this opportunity as part of patient choice. Would increased provision of CAM on the NHS be something to be welcomed or would it represent a betrayal of scientific medicine that must stop?



What is complementary and alternative medicine (CAM)?

This umbrella term refers to treatments that differ from conventional medicine – medicine based on scientific testing that is taught to medical professionals. However, while alternative medicine is used in place of conventional medicine, complementary medicine is used alongside it. There has been a shift towards seeing CAM as a complement rather than an alternative. The term integrated (or integrative) medicine is used by its advocates to describe use of CAM for which there is ‘some high-quality evidence of safety and effectiveness’ combined with conventional medicine. Leading examples of CAM include homeopathy, osteopathy, acupuncture, hypnotherapy, nutritional therapy, massage and reflexology. CAM is often practised as part of a holistic approach to medicine, a central part of which is the ‘human effect’ of individual treatment [Ref: Guardian].

Should all treatments be subject to the same standard of proof?

Critics of CAM argue the NHS should only provide treatments that are scientifically proven, principally by meeting the gold standard of randomised controlled trials. Put bluntly, ‘there is no alternative medicine. There is only scientifically proven, evidence-based medicine supported by solid data or unproven medicine’ [Ref: [Journal of the American Medical Association](#)]. CAM’s supporters say it suffers from a lack of research into how it works – pharmaceutical companies ignore it because they can’t make money from it. More fundamentally, they say, it would be unfair to expect all treatments to meet the same standard of

proof. It would result in a ‘medical apartheid’ where treatments that cannot be explained by the standard bio-medical model are excluded by the NHS, despite all the evidence from patients that they work [Ref: [BBC News](#)]. Critics do not deny that treatments may make people feel better, but where they are effective, as may be the case with therapeutic massage, they say this can be measured by orthodox science [Ref: [RCGP](#)], whereas treatments like homeopathy just have a placebo effect. CAM’s supporters say the placebo effect is a legitimate treatment, but also want to leave open the possibility of alternative explanations for efficacy that current science might fail to identify. But critics say that prescribing placebos is unethical and that advocates of CAM are intellectually dishonest to go on believing in a treatment when it lacks evidence.

Homeopathy: ‘worse than witchcraft’ or of proven benefit to patients?

Homeopathy is a particular focus of criticism: doctors expressed alarm at a new system for its licensing and the NHS has cut back on treatments. Because it involves diluting an active ingredient in water to such an extent that not one drop of it may remain, there seems to be no scientific explanation of how it could work. But supporters point to its popularity. They say the evidence is not conclusive and because homeopathy relies on individualised treatments it’s not suited to assessment through narrow conventional scientific trials.



THE DEBATE IN CONTEXT CONTINUED...

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If CAM is unlikely to cause harm to patients, then what's the harm of providing it on the NHS?

Supporters say treatments like St John's Wort can be not only more effective and cheaper than conventional treatments like antidepressants, but also have fewer side-effects. Baum, though, argues in the case of homeopathy that the safety argument is like 'licensing a witches' brew as a medicine so long as the bat wings are sterile'; money spent on homeopathy would be better spent on cancer drugs. But is this, as some suggest, simply a patronising and old-fashioned attitude that shows a lack of respect for patients?



ESSENTIAL READING

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NOTES

The great health debate: Complementary medicine
Daily Mail May 2006

Head-to-head: Complementary medicine
Michael Baum vs Peter Fisher *BBC News* May 2006

For

Quackery and superstition - available soon on the NHS
Polly Toynbee *Guardian* January 2008

Sticking a needle in alternative medicine
Stuart Derbyshire *Spiked* November 2007

Homeopathy is worse than witchcraft - and the NHS must stop paying for it
Michael Baum *Daily Mail* 01 May 2007 May 2007

Complementary medicines are useless and dangerous, says Britain's foremost expert
Barbara Rowlands interviews Edzard Ernst *Daily Mail* December 2006

Snake oil - or NHS tool?
Michael Hanlon *Daily Mail* May 2006

Against

Who's confused about alternative medicine?
Robert Verkerk *Alliance for Natural Health* December 2006

Not so complementary
Nicola Sturzaker *Guardian Society* September 2006

Complementary Medical Association Responce
Complementary Medical Association May 2006

Best of both worlds
Michael Dixon *Observer* July 2001

It's cheaper and has no nasty side-effects
Peter Fisher *Daily Mail* May 2006

In Depth

Paying a complement: Should the NHS fund alternative medicine?
Michael Baum vs George Lewith *The New Generalist* 4(3)
October 2006

The role of complementary and alternative medicine in the NHS: Summary and guide to the report
Christopher Smallwood *FreshMinds* pp. 8-18 October 2005

The rise and rise of CAM
Brid Hehir *Spiked* March 2001



BACKGROUNDEERS

The dangers of complementary therapy

Michael Baum *Breast Cancer Research* December 2007

CAM - junk science or genuine alternative?

Battle of Ideas debate

In defence of scientific medicine

Michael Baum *Spiked* October 2007

Letter calling for homeopathy boycott

Gustav Born *Times Online* May 2007

Academic doctors' views of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) and its role within the NHS

BMC Complementary and Alternative Medicine May 2007

Petition for complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) on the NHS

IvyRose Holistic March 2007

Implausible claims against homeopathy

Melanie Oxley *Primary Care Today* July/August 2006

Should the NHS fund complementary medicine?

NHS Networks May 2006

All in the mind?

Anjana Ahuja *The Times* May 2006

Q&A: Complementary therapies

BBC News May 2006

What's wrong with complementary medicine?

BBC Breakfast May 2006

Should the NHS pay for alternative medicine?

Times Online Debate May 2006

Should NHS fund alternative medicine?

BBC News Have Your May 2006

Q&A: Complementary therapies

Guardian Unlimited May 2006

Should the NHS pay for holistic medicine?

Telegraph Speakers' Corner May 2006

Full letter: doctors' campaign against alternative therapies

Michael Baum et al *Times Online* May 2006

A speech by HRH The Prince of Wales on integrated healthcare

The Prince of Wales May 2006

The other medicine

BBC Radio 4 September – October 2004

Complementary and alternative medicine

House of Lords Science and Technology Committee Sixth Report

November 2000

Complementary medicine

4 Health from Channel 4

Complementary medicine

bbc.co.uk Health

ORGANISATIONS

Healthwatch

Sense about Science

The Prince's Foundation for Integrated Health

The Society of Homeopaths

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IN THE NEWS

Hard-up NHS trusts cut back on unproven homoeopathy treatment

The Times May 2007

Doctors renew drive to ban NHS homeopathy

Guardian May 2007

Alternative therapy put on trial

BBC News February 2007

Alternative medicine is defended

BBC News November 2006

Homeopathic licensing alarms doctors

Guardian September 2006

Charles defends holistic medicine

Daily Telegraph May 2006

Doctors' letter sparks NHS alternative therapies row

Guardian May 2006

Prince defiant over alternative medicine after doctors' attack

Times Online May 2006

Keep complementary medicine out of NHS, say leading doctors

Guardian May 2006

Doctors attack 'bogus' therapies

BBC News May 2006

NHS told to abandon alternative medicine

The Times May 2006

New study is boost to homoeopathy

BBC News November 2005

Alternative therapies 'cost more'

The Times October 2005

Prince backs alternative treatments on the NHS

The Times October 2005

Alternative therapies 'could benefit' NHS

Times Online October 2005

Charles study backs NHS therapies

BBC News October 2005

Homoeopathy's benefit questioned

BBC News August 2005

Complementary cancer therapy call

BBC News November 2004

Complementary medicine on NHS

BBC News October 2004

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**“TEENAGE CITIZENS
THINKING DEEPLY
ABOUT...SOCIAL
ISSUES”**

IAN GRANT, CEO, BRITANNICA

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