

Alternative Health for Holistic Care

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Abstract

Health care reforms, including health insurance reform and universal coverage, are being driven by the people in Thailand to decrease costs, enhance quality, and expand access. Alternative health indicates, not only cost effectiveness, but also high quality of care. It is a fully-integrated holistic care which is composed of body, mind, and spirit. The best approach is the softest and gentlest care that avoids dangerous and traumatic procedures. Alternative health is categorized into seven fields of practice, namely: (i) herbal medicine, (ii) diet and nutrition, (iii) mind/body intervention, (iv) alternative system of medical practice, (v) manual healing method, (vi) bio-electric, magnetic and pharmacology, and (vii) biologic treatment. However, the evaluation - safety, affordability, need and efficacy - is very important for decision-making to choose any appropriate alternative health.

Keywords: *Alternative health, holistic care, herbal medicine, diet and nutrition, mind/body intervention, alternative system of medical practice, manual healing method, bio-electric, magnetic and pharmacology, and biologic treatment.*

Introduction

In the globalization era, the development of medical and health technology as well as epidemiological transition has contributed to use of expensive and high-technology medical equipment in the Thai health system. More complex procedures for diagnosis and curative care have been introduced from abroad. Such imports increased considerably during the bubble-economy period and this increase discontinued as soon as the economic crisis erupted. However, imports and use of Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) machines in Thailand between 1988 and 1999 have increased dramatically (Fig.1). It should be noted that imported medical equipment and expensive technology are not only costly, but also encourage over consumption (Ministry of Public Health 2000).

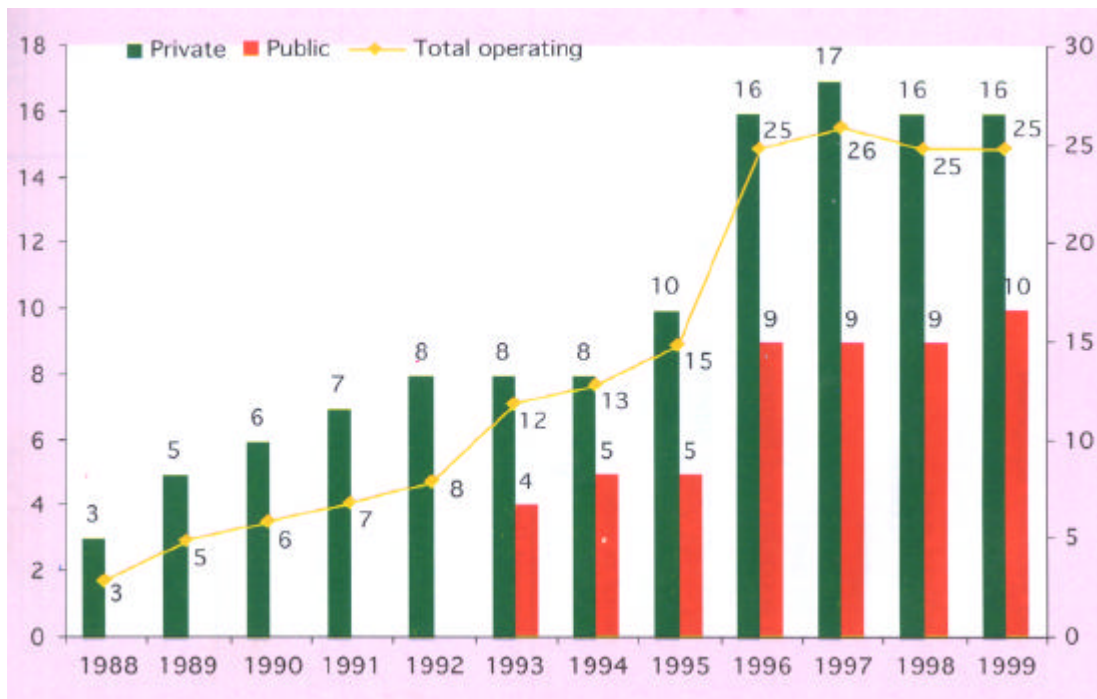
Besides, most of the medical and health technologies, particularly high-tech medical devices, are clustered in large cities, mostly in the private sector (Fig. 2).

Furthermore, it was found that in 1998, there were 5.21% GDP or about Baht 284,000 million spent on health. The rate had risen significantly during the past decade and also much higher than other Asian countries (Table 1).

The above situation indicates the failure of using cost-benefit and safety analysis equipment (Ministry of Public Health 1998). Therefore, effective mechanism should be set up to promote discriminatory use of health products and technologies in both modern medicine and alternative health, in particularly, alternative health such as traditional healing and herbal therapy. It is not only costly but also non-invasive and potentially toxic.

What is Alternative Health?

Alternative health is not new. It represents a return to the principles that have been a part of human understanding of health and disease for thousands of years. It is vast and used around the world. For example acupuncture and herbal medicine have been used in China for mainstream care; and in India, Ayurvedic



Source: Ministry of Public Health (2000)

Note: The number for each year is recorded at the end of the year, except for 1999

Fig. 1. Number of MRI devices in Thailand 1998-1999



Source: Ministry of Public Health (2000)

Fig. 2. Trends of health expenditure in the public and private sectors, 1980-98

medicine, a personalized system of restoring balance to the body, mind, and spirit, has been an acceptable approach to preventing and treating disease. Japan also has long-standing medical traditions that include 'shiatsu' massage. Traditional Thai healings such as

herbal therapy and Thai massage have been widely used and accepted by the Thai people for a very long time. Currently, alternative health care has a tendency to become a popular and widespread practice in Thailand when compared with the recent past.

Table 1. Comparison of health expenditures among some Asian countries

Country	Per capita health expenditures (US\$)	Percentage in relation to GDP	Proportion gov: house hold
Indonesia	76	1.8	39.61
Philippines	60	2.3	56.5 : 43.5
Sri Lanka	61	1.8	77.8 : 22.2
Malaysia	220	2.4	58.3 : 41.7
Thailand	126	6.21	34.8 : 65.2
Singapore	845	3.6	36.1 : 63.9
South Korea	518	5.4	33.3 : 66.7

Source: Ministry of Public Health (2000)

Note: For 1998, the exchange rate of Baht 37 to US\$ 1 was used.

Principle of Alternative Health

Alternative health is a mixture of different beliefs and techniques. The principle outlines are as follow (Elupoulos 1999 and Shealy 1996):

1. The body has a natural ability to heal itself and remains stable.
2. Health and healing are state of emotional, mental, spiritual, and physical balance. Ill health is the result of being in a state of imbalance or disease.
3. Basic and good health practices build the foundation for healing; people need good nutrition, exercise, rest, and avoidance of harmful practices such as cigarette smoking or excessive alcohol consumption.
4. Healing practices are individualized. Each person is an entirely original individual and cannot be treated in exactly the same way as every other person.
5. Clients are responsible for their own healing. Healing is quicker and more effective if the person takes central responsibility for his or her own health and has an active involvement in the healing process.

It is obvious that the principles of alternative health are the same as the concept

of holistic care based on the belief in unity of body, mind, and (including spirit). It also promotes good health, healing, and disease prevention.

Seven Fields of Practice

The US National Institute of Health has categorized alternative modalities and therapies into seven specific fields of practice as follow (Kuhn 1999):

Herbal Medicine

Herbal remedies typically have long history of use as part of traditional and folk healing programs. It is applied in all area of the world. The ingredients of herbal preparations are usually dried materials. They are often prescribed as soup or tea but may be taken in their raw form or processed into pill, powder, ointment and liquid tonic. The majority is of plant origin but a few are derived from minerals or from animal sources.

Diet and Nutrition

Diet and nutrition are focused on health maintenance and disease prevention. What we eat is influenced by many factors, including personal preference, lifestyle, culture and religion. Most alternative therapists believe that a balanced diet is

essential, but opinion differs in what exactly a balanced diet is. Some therapists recommend a vegetarian diet (one that excludes all meat) or macrobiotics (eating locally-grown whole grains, seeds, and plant-based food). Fasting, food supplement, and special diet for disease, also form part of recommended dietary.

Mind/Body (Biobehavioral) Interventions

The notion that we can influence disease with our mind is popular in several cultures. Some proponents argue that patients can use mental attributes and mind/body work to prevent or cure disease. This belief has great appeal because it ascribes to the patient control over the illness and suggests that individual or mental thought can overcome disease. Mind/body or behavioral interventions include such therapies as biofeedback, relaxation, imagery, meditation, hypnosis, psychotherapy, prayer, mental healing, art, dance, music therapy, and yoga.

Alternative (Non-biomedical) Systems of Healing

Non-biotic systems of healing include traditional oriental medicine and western alternative therapies. Acupuncture (therapeutic technique used in traditional Chinese medicine) and Ayurveda (a system of healing from India relying on diet, exercise, and meditation) are also parts of oriental medicine. Besides, homeopathy and naturopathy are recommended.

Manual Healing Methods

Manual healing includes a variety of touch and manipulation technique. Hand on massage is a useful technique for patients because it gives benefit by promoting relaxation and stress reduction. In particular, therapeutic touch is similar to psychological treatment by reducing anxiety. Osteopathy, chiropractic, and physical therapy are part of manual healing methods.

Bioelectromagnetics:

Bioelectromagnetics is the study of living organisms and their interactions with electromagnetic fields for a variety of applications, including bone repair, wound healing and immune system stimulation. Magnetic therapy accelerates healing by attracting and repelling charged particles in the blood, thereby stimulating activity and heat which dilates blood vessels and increases circulation. Some therapists recommend magnetic therapy to relieve pain by creating a slight electrical current that stimulates the nervous system, thereby blocking pain sensations.

Pharmacological and Biological Treatments

This class of healing is especially problematic because it can delay needed mainstream therapy. It includes drugs and vaccines not yet accepted by mainstream medicine. For example, shark cartilage as a cancer therapy appears to be on the wane, as studies fail to support its claim. According to mainstream scientists, the molecules of active ingredients in the "food supplement" shark cartilage sold at health food stores are too large to be absorbed. They decompose into inert ingredient and are simply excreted. Although finding a way to kill cancer cells by cutting of their blood supply (anti-angiogenesis) remains a major focus of scientific research, there is little hope that shark cartilage food supplement can help and reaching that goal (Cassileth 1999).

Making the Right Choice in Alternative Health Care

Austin (1998) identified that persons chose alternative health care in various reasons. Some perceived benefits depend on advertising through promotional material. In addition, most people stated "The alternative therapies promote health rather than just focusing on

illness.” Vincent and Furnham(1996) also found that most people choose alternative health care because they believe that alternative therapies will enable them to take a more active part in maintaining health. However, many alternatives have value and should be encouraged, but there are also others that are useless, or even dangerous. Thus the alternatives should be studied carefully. One way of evaluating the option is, as suggested by the Health Action Information Network (2000), to ask the “SANE” (= Safety, Affordability, Need, Efficacy) question, as described below:

Safety

People tend to think that if a therapy has been used for a long time then it must be safe. This is not necessarily true. Many alternative remedies have not been evaluated for their side effects, especially those that come from prolonged use.

Affordability

Alternative health practitioners often offer more affordable services than western medicine. Many alternative therapies have also become very expensive, sometimes even more expensive than western medicine.

Need

Always evaluate the claims made for alternative therapies. Such claims as “rejuvenation” or “anti-aging” are often not just unscientific, but irrelevant, given the many more pressing health needs that people have.

Efficacy

This is the most important criterion to evaluate. Often, people are convinced to pay for a particular remedy because of testimonials from friends or relatives who claim they benefited from a certain treatment. We have to

remember that the placebo effect is very powerful. A placebo is a medical product or technique that has no actual physiological effect, for example, a tablet of starch or sugar pill. These placebos may help the people to relieve certain symptoms because of the element of faith or belief. On the other hand, the patient would have recovered spontaneously, whether or not there was a treatment. An example is the case of the common cold, which will go away even without medicines.

Discussion

Alternative health has been a part of human understanding of health and disease. It evolved within a framework that the human being is not simply a physical machine, like a car, but a subtle and complex blend of body, mind, and emotion (or spirit). In the last few years, alternative health has become increasingly popular because of health care reforms, including health insurance reform. The issue is also being driven by the people to decrease costs, enhance quality of care, and expand access. Therefore health professionals must be alert when a patient is considering or deciding to participate in alternative health. As health care providers, we must:

- Understand the purpose of alternative health.
- Understand what alternative health is capable of treating.
- Identify the contra-indications and adverse effects of alternative health and discuss these with the patient.
- Identify any allergies of the patient and determine if there are any problems with the therapy.

In addition, many nursing schools are beginning to recognize the need to teach nursing students about alternative health. Thus, alternative health should be included in nursing curriculum, both in theory and clinical application. It may include alternative health subject in existing required courses and electives.

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