

Preface

The subject of complementary and alternative medicines attracts controversy. There is often great passion expressed by proponents of both conventional and complementary and alternative therapies.

The current paradigm in “Western” medicine is that it must be evidence-based. There are established scientific methodologies, epitomised by the randomised controlled trial, which govern the investigation of new treatments. The results of this research are used by practitioners to balance the known risks and benefits when advising patients about treatment options.

In contrast, the principles of Chinese medicine, for example, are part of a culture that has evolved over centuries and belief in that system is part of the healing experience. Other complementary and alternative medicines are promoted through collections of single case reports.

Central to the discussion of any treatment is the patients. Patients differ widely in their understanding of evidence-based medicine, and for them there is a singular personal experience of illness. They receive information from multiple sources, including friends and relatives, and weigh many factors, beyond the medical facts, into treatment decisions. They use complementary and alternative therapies to a similar degree as conventional medicines. They often seek to maintain control over their therapy. If they feel that their doctor disapproves of a complementary or alternative medicine choice they simply do not discuss it and therefore never receive the doctor’s perspective. They can be left with a confusing array of opinions.

My co-editor, Monica Robotin from Cancer Council New South Wales, joined with me at Cancer Council Australia to collect together a broad spectrum of perspectives on complementary and alternative medicines. We chose authors who practised complementary and alternative medicine, those who practised conventional medicine, researchers, educators and consumers. We asked each to present their perspective on complementary and alternative medicines, and gave them the freedom to express themselves in their own styles. The result is a lively mixture of poignant stories, strong opinions and scientific reviews. By reading 20 different perspectives on complementary and alternative medicines we trust that readers will then be able to form their own opinions, their perspectives.

We are most grateful that all the authors agreed to give their time and expertise voluntarily, and indeed the proceeds will go towards cancer control and support activities at the Cancer Councils. It also reflects a passion that we all share for improving the lives of those with cancer.

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