Med Students Cite Place For Alternative Therapies

In the largest national survey of its kind, researchers from UCLA and UC San Diego measured medical students' attitudes and beliefs about complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) and found that three-quarters of them felt conventional Western medicine would benefit by integrating more CAM therapies and ideas. The findings will be published in the online issue of *Evidence-based Complementary and Alternative Medicine* (eCAM).

“Complementary and alternative medicine is receiving increased attention in light of the global health crisis and the significant role of traditional medicine in meeting public health needs in developing countries,” said study author Ryan Abbott, a researcher at the UCLA Center for East-West Medicine. “Integrating CAM into mainstream health care is now a global phenomenon.”

CAM, which includes therapies such as massage, yoga, herbal medicine and acupuncture, is characterized by a holistic and highly individualized approach to patient care. It's emphasis is on maximizing the body's inherent healing ability; getting patients involved as active participants in their own care; addressing the physical, mental and spiritual attributes of a disease; and preventive care. While interest in these fields has increased dramatically in the United States in recent years, information about such therapies has not yet been widely integrated into medical education.

“Even with the high prevalence of CAM use today, most physicians still know little about non-conventional forms of medicine,” said study author Michael S. Goldstein, Ph.D., a senior research scientist at the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research. “Investigating medical students' attitudes and knowledge will help us assess whether this may change in the future.”

Researchers found that although medical students endorsed the importance of complementary and alternative medicine, obstacles remain that may prevent future doctors from recommending these treatments in their practices. According to the findings:

- 77 percent of participants agreed to some extent that patients whose doctors know about complementary and alternative medicine in addition to conventional medicine, benefit more than those whose doctors are only familiar with Western medicine.
- 74 percent of participants agreed to some extent that a system of medicine that integrates therapies of conventional and complementary and alternative medicine would be more effective than either type of medicine

provided independently.
- 84 percent of participants agreed to some extent that the field contains beliefs, ideas and therapies from which conventional medicine could benefit.
- 49 percent of participating medical students indicated that they have used complementary and alternative treatments, however, few would recommend or use these treatments in their practice until more scientific assessment has occurred.

“Our research suggests that persuading doctors to integrate CAM will require investment in the types of clinical research that form the backbone of Western medicine,” adds Abbott. "Even now, medical schools have the opportunity to train the next generation of medical practitioners in health care systems outside of conventional medicine. Core values of CAM can help students develop a more holistic and individualized approach to patient care.”

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