

Chapter 1

An Overview of Complementary and Alternative Medicine

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ABSTRACT

A treatment that is not recognised as conventional medicine is frequently referred to as part of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) methods. This Chapter will provide an overview of the several CAM definitions currently proposed and the types of CAM methods. The prevalence of CAM use and the characteristics and attitudes of CAM users will be also explored with a focus on patients with kidney diseases. The reasons for CAM use and the literature on the placebo effects as a debated hypothesis of CAM mechanism of action is presented.

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INTRODUCTION

Complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) has existed in Asian cultures for centuries, recently it has become prominent in the western world. A study published in 2008 showed that 38% of adults and 12% of children used CAM in the United States in 2007 (Barnes, et al. 2008). Most recently, a survey conducted under the cross European CAMbrella project, showed that in Europe one in two surveyed people had used CAM between 2010 and 2012 (EuroCAM, 2014), and it is evident that ancient therapies have been re-discovered by patients in order to find solutions to their increasing numbers of health issues. Writing an overview of CAM is difficult. While the definition of orthodox medicine is well established, CAM techniques are so widely spread across the world and embedded in different cultures that giving CAM a single definition is a challenge. Not only do different organisations define CAM in various ways, but also they include or exclude techniques within this term according to the organisation's beliefs and culture. For example, some people may identify dietary advice, exercise or prayer as CAM, but Asian people do not think that prayer is an alternative medicine as it is a part of their religion.

The interest in CAM may possibly be due to the rising number of concerns that patients have towards orthodox, western medicine. This in turn has led to a call for regulation and proof of efficacy. International establishments like the World Health Organization (WHO), recognize that it is essential to guide this process by suggesting the development of country specific policies (WHO, 2013). The goal of WHO, and CAM practitioner associations, is to analyse the value and safety of CAM interventions with scientific methods in order to best advise patients.

This chapter aims to: explain the difficulties in collating different understanding of CAM practices by Western organisations; discuss the prevalence of CAM use; explore the penchant for CAM seen in patients with renal conditions; and discuss the placebo effect, an important part of all healing processes. Suggestions of future research directions will be presented at the end of this and the following chapters.

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