

## Original Research Article

# An account of alternative and complementary medicine and its scope in a clinical scale

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Alternative medicine is the practice of using alternative therapies as treatment modalities and complementary medicine is their inculcation with conventional medical practices. The purpose of this article was to judge people's perception of these practices and assess societal attitude towards alternative and complementary medical practices.

**Methods:** A survey was conducted among non-medical professionals to assess their attitude towards alternative medicine. They were asked questions with multiple choices to choose from in order to grade their attitude towards and comprehension of alternative and complementary medicine. The questions were designed in a way so as to demand responses ranging from their last visit to an alternative medical therapist to their reason for their visit and their experience.

**Results:** It was observed that most people surveyed were aware of the difference between conventional and complementary medicine but usually visited an alternative therapist without consulting their physician. It was documented that most people were misguided about the actual benefits of complementary medical practices and a majority of the surveyed population chose either alternative medicine or conventional medicine but very few were willing to integrate the two.

**Conclusions:** Alternative medicine is extremely beneficial when used in tandem with conventional medicine and provides numerous benefits. Its use and propagation however must be strictly monitored in order to prevent quackery and the spread of misconceptions regarding its effects.

**Keywords:** Alternative medicine, Quacks, Placebo

## INTRODUCTION

Alternative medicine is any practice that aims to achieve benefits of conventional medicine without its biological plausibility and lacks adequate proof through trials. Complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) has been defined as diagnosis, treatment and/or prevention which complements mainstream medicine by contributing to a common whole, satisfying a demand not met by orthodoxy or diversifying the conceptual framework of

medicine.<sup>1</sup> It has been concluded by various studies that cancer patients are more likely to turn towards CAM than any other patients.<sup>2-5</sup>

Much of the perceived effect of an alternative practice stems from its placebo effect on the patient or from spontaneous resolution of the disease itself. This fact is exacerbated by patients tendency to turn to alternative medicine under dire circumstances of failure of conventional medicine. Some alternative therapies are especially harmful actively (e.g. cyanide poisoning from

amygdalin or ingestion of hydrogen peroxide) or by interfering with the action of conventional medicine.<sup>6</sup>

In spite of its various dangers including death by poisoning, alternative medicine is not all sham when it comes to its absolute use in a clinical setting. When used in tandem with conventional medicine, it can provide various beneficial effects. Therapies like acupuncture may help relieve sickness due to chemotherapy drugs. There are claims that certain complementary therapies can boost one's immune system and help fighting certain cancer but these claims haven't yet been adequately proven by clinical trials.<sup>7</sup> Most of the commonly used therapies tend to have minimal or no adverse effects and are usually non-dependence ensuing which might be important for some ex-addicts. It is most commonly used as an analgesic therapy by patients for whom conventional medicine turns out to be beyond their means or sometimes proves to be ineffective.

Alternative medicine can be beneficial to a person's overall wellbeing as the approach focuses on healing the mind, body and spirit. Therapies like massage, biofeedback, meditation and visual imagery help relax a person and reduce stress. Art and music therapies are even used to relieve symptoms of depression and schizophrenia by stimulating the natural release of endorphins and opiates in the body.<sup>9</sup>

Although CAM has been practiced in India for thousands of years, there is limited literature available on the extent of use, attitude and perception of patients utilizing CAM services. Since practitioners of modern medicines may have to encounter patients using CAM, it would be useful to know their patients' attitude and perception towards CAM.

Hence, this study was conducted to assess the extent of use of CAM among people on the age group of 18-60 years so as to assess their attitude towards and their utilization of CAM.

## METHODS

### *Data collection procedure*

This is a cross-sectional survey with data targeting non-medical professionals in India who attended the survey voluntarily with the author present on the spot to answer any doubts regarding the questionnaire. The survey was circulated online and 80 entries were received before the results were calculated and tabulated for this article but the form kept collecting results for future references.

### *Questionnaire*

The Questionnaire was based on peoples' basic understanding and awareness of alternative medicine. They were questioned about their attitude towards the

various therapies. Questions were based on their experiences at previous visits to these therapists and the probability of a revisit. They were asked about the reasons for their visit and whether they consulted with their physician before the visit.

The surveyed population was questioned on their understanding of the advantages and disadvantages of alternative medicine and whether they preferred allopathic medicine, alternative medicine or preferred to use both the practices in tandem towards their benefit.

### *Data analysis*

All data were incorporated into Microsoft excel spreadsheets and analysed. Final tabulations of the data were done in order to make it comprehensible for the readers and for ease of presentation.

## RESULTS

Out of all the 80 people surveyed, a whopping 87.5% (70) of them knew what alternative medicine actually was but 7.1% (6) of these were misinformed and labelled practices like emergency surgery as a complementary therapy.

Most of the surveyed population visited an alternative therapist because they found it better suited for their needs. These people constituted 43.75% (35) of those surveyed. 17.5% (14) of the people surveyed had never visited an alternative therapist of any sort while more than 50% had visited one at least once in the past year.

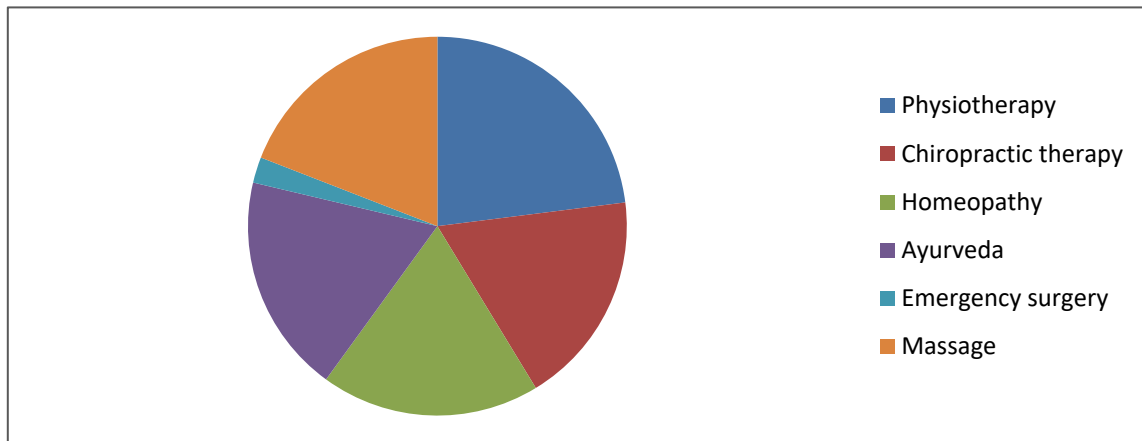
26.25% (21) of the people visited an alternative medical therapist after failure of conventional medicine while 22.5% (18) actually consulted their primary physician before a visit to the alternative medical therapist.

28.75% (23) of the surveyed population resorted exclusively to alternative medicine, while the remaining used both alternative and conventional modern medicine.

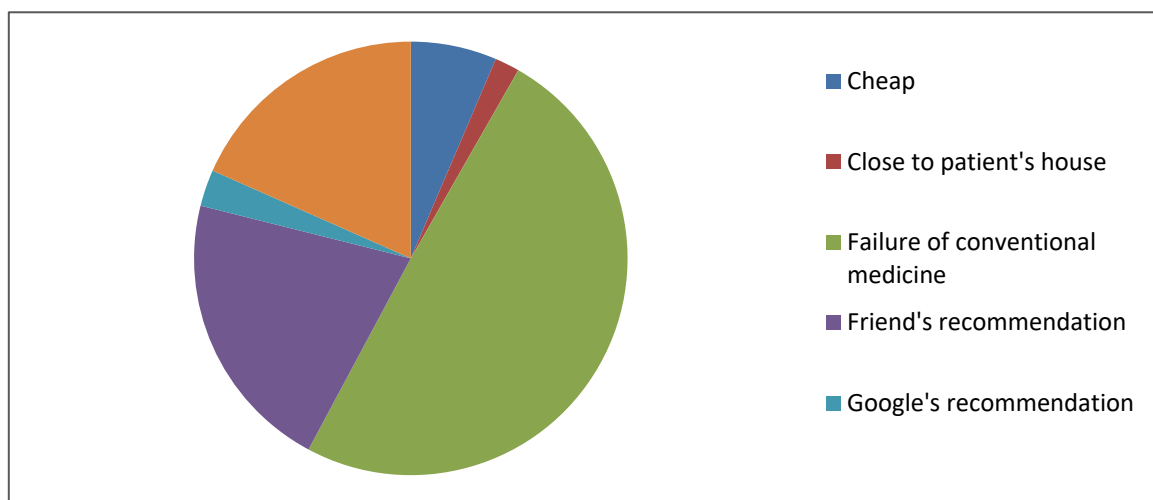
47.5% (38) of the people who were surveyed prefer alternative medicine over conventional medicine for daily ordinary ailments.

It was observed that alternative medical therapies were preferred primarily due to the absence of any known side effects. Mis-information and peer influence also played a major role in people choosing exclusive alternative medicine instead of complementary integration of alternative and conventional medicine.

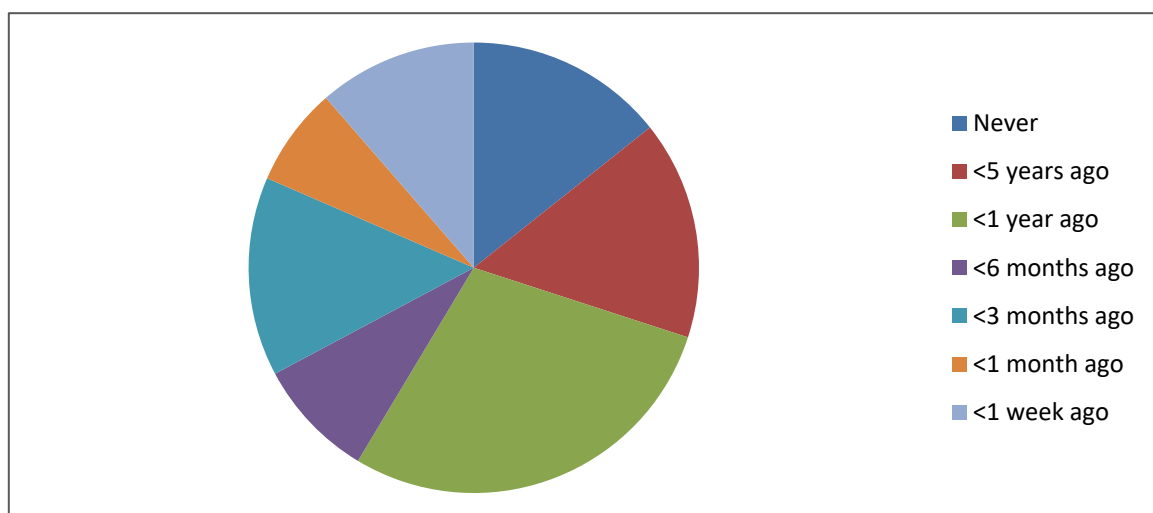
In spite of the relatively small sample size of the said survey, it allowed us to form a brief notion regarding society's attitude towards alternative medicine and CAM and also shined light upon their understanding of the same.



**Figure 1: People's understanding of alternative medicine.**



**Figure 2: People's reasons for use of alternative medicine.**



**Figure 3: People's time since last visit to an alternative therapist.**

## DISCUSSION

Although India is the birthplace of one of the oldest alternative therapies, Ayurveda, not many studies have

documented the acceptance and patient attitude towards various alternative therapies. There have also not been adequate trials to prove the efficacy of alternative medicine for the various complicated clinical diseases.

Alternative medicine is very attractive in the promises of a healthy and pure lifestyle but all these promises are without concrete scientific proof. It is extremely important to educate society about complementary medicine and drive them away from pursuing alternative medicine exclusively. Alternative medicine has the potential to alter certain symptoms which may prove to be cardinally diagnostic in certain severe conditions and they may be missed by conventional medicine due to the undue meddling of various alternative medical practices and may prove to be fatal to the patient.

It is also important to convey to people the need to consult their physician before opting for various alternative medical therapies in order to appropriately add the same to the patient's history. This will help the patient's future doctors in case of an emergency.

As observed through the above survey, although most people are aware of alternative therapies, they are hesitant to use them in tandem with conventional allopathic medicine in order to further their own clinical benefits. This needs to be changed by aggressive enlightenment campaigns towards the promotion of CAM among the society. Doctors need to take the initiative of including certain therapies as a part of their treatment regime so as to provide patients with an altogether comfortable journey through their recovery.

Despite the recognition by the Government of India and easy availability of CAM including the Indian systems of medicine in India, CAM is still not a part of the conventional medical curriculum in majority of medical colleges in India. As a result the medical graduate may lack awareness about CAM.<sup>10</sup> The need of the hour is to introduce CAM sensitization in medical schools so as to familiarize the students with the therapies. This has already been recognized and initiated in the United States and across Europe as 64% of US medical schools and 40% of medical departments in European schools offer CAM related courses.<sup>11</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Sensitizing the society towards the benefits of integrating conventional medicine and alternative therapies is of utmost importance in order to advance the medical interests of the country as a whole. All this can only be done when there is a basic idea of society's understanding and present attitude towards CAM, which has been attempted in this article.

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