

When developing a condition such as psoriasis or psoriatic arthritis patients face a dilemma, often abdicating any responsibility for treatment by placing themselves under the care of a General Practitioner, and many say “I’ve got this problem, can you fix it?” this might be a simplistic generalisation but pretty much a hope and desire.

Mostly patients are then treated with what is called conventional medicine. In the UK conventional treatments are rigorously tested in clinical trials in order to prove the treatment works. The product gains a license and can be prescribed; a further step is undertaken by the National Institute of Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) in England and Wales and in Scotland by the Scottish Medicines Consortium (SMC), these bodies review evidence and a treatments place within the NHS, by producing guidance for doctors.

As with all treatments often the desired effect, isn't always forthcoming, the treatment may have an unwanted side-effect or the patient is just uncomfortable with the treatment for various reasons, which may appear to be trivial to the prescriber but will be a real issue for the patient.

So the idea of complementing a conventional treatment or seeking an alternative therapy becomes in some cases an attractive solution. This particularly is the case when the hope of conventional medicine has left the patient less than satisfied.

So how can you judge if the claims made by complementary and alternative therapists are genuine and stand up to scrutiny, particularly as many practitioners have no formally recognised qualifications. Well essentially it is an unregulated industry and as long as specific claims aren't made, then therapists are free to setup and provide a 'service'.

One in five of people in the UK now use complementary and alternative medicine (CAM), it is estimated that there are 50,000 non-medical complementary practitioners, with an enormous number of accreditation schemes and registration bodies to support them.

Popular therapies such as acupuncture and herbal medicine were recommended to be regulated by law by a House of Lords report in 2001

The increasing integration of mainstream and complementary medicine is primarily driven by patient demand, as people choose complementary treatments. The annual turnover of complementary

healthcare is estimated to be £1.6billion.

The British Medical Association (BMA)² have found that 80% of doctors would like to see acupuncture available on the NHS, and an estimated 25% of Scottish GPs has had some homeopathic training.

It is reported that CAM is being used in GP practices for a range of patients, including those with cancer, mental health problems and coronary heart disease. Some hospitals are also using therapies such as massage and aromatherapy in cancer care and pain relief.

The main treatments are osteopathy, chiropractic, acupuncture, homeopathy and herbal medicine and are those which doctors most frequently refer their patients.

Other therapies, such as aromatherapy, reflexology, massage and hypnotherapy, make up a smaller percentage of referrals, with a very small number made for treatments such as reiki and shiatsu.

But this popularity doesn't necessary correlate with scientific credibility. There is strong evidence, for example, that acupuncture is effective for a number of conditions, but the clinical evidence for the efficacy of homeopathy is more controversial.

Many NHS practices offer some form of access to complementary medicine, either within the practice or via referral to an outside practitioner, with 42% of treatments have to be paid for by patients themselves, overall, 90% of complementary therapies are purchased privately

There are five homeopathic NHS hospitals in the UK, and the British Medical Association says GPs have a duty to refer patients for homeopathic treatments within the NHS.

The Department of Health recommends that only those therapies that are statutorily regulated or have robust self-regulation should be made available through public funding.

If you are contemplating the use of CAM, always do as much research as possible about the therapy and the practitioner, talk to your GP to see if you can access it via the NHS. If you know someone who has tried a particular therapy, ask their views and see if there were any benefits or problems that weren't obvious or considered.

References:

1. House of Lords Science and Technology- Sixth Report. Complementary and alternative medicine (2000) London: House of Lords, HMSO.
2. British Medical Association. London www.bma.org.uk . Accessed online May 2008.