

## Community Medicine

**KEYWORDS:** Alternative Therapists; Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM); Healing; Holistic Approach; Spiritual Needs.

### PERSPECTIVES OF ALTERNATIVE THERAPISTS REGARDING USE OF COMPLEMENTARY AND ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE IN CANCER



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#### ABSTRACT

**Background:** In recent years, use of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) has increased with growing incidence of chronic and incurable diseases. Better understanding of opinions of alternative therapists is very important research area. **Objective:** Present study was conducted with the objective to explore awareness, perceptions and beliefs of health care providers regarding alternative therapies. **Methodology:** Qualitative survey was conducted among selected Alternative therapists /Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) practitioners of different fields from different states of the country. Their opinions, perceptions and beliefs regarding CAM in cancer cure were explored by conducting personal interviews using semi-structured interview schedules. Study variables included knowledge, perceptions, and perceived reliefs, cost-effectiveness of alternative therapies, perceived benefits, positive and negative motivations concerning CAM, misunderstandings/ misconceptions regarding CAM, reasons behind popularity of CAM use. **Results:** Total 244 CAM providers including 209 (85.7%) practitioners having some professional degrees whereas remaining 35(14.3%) were not having any professional degree. There were 121(49.6%) were practitioners of Ayurveda and 54(22.1%) of Homeopathy. The most common argument in favor of usefulness in CAM therapies was observed that CAM improves/built the immune of the patient (25.0%) followed by that CAM therapies subside the side effects without any side effect (14.3%). The most common argument in favor of CAM was having no side effects (77.5%) followed by close to nature (66.0%). More efficacy (48.8%) and easy availability (44.3%) were also among positive notions in favor of CAM. High toxicity of conventional therapies was reported as the most common shortcoming favoring use of alternative therapies among cancer patients. There were 216(88.5%) respondents who were in favour of scientific evaluation of CAM therapies. **Conclusions and Suggestions:** The study provided perceived supportive evidence in favour of CAM for treating cancer patients based on opinions of alternative therapists. Importance of healing of cancer patients is felt through addressing spiritual needs based of cancer patients. There is a need of continuous scientific evaluation of beneficial effects of CAM therapies. Study also suggests need of formal training of CAM practitioners for improving spiritual health of cancer patients.

#### Introduction

In recent years, use of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) has increased with growing incidence of chronic and incurable diseases. The exact reasons for the popularity of CAM are complex, varying with time, space and also from therapy to therapy. No single determinant of the present popularity of complementary and alternative medicine exists. Practices of CAM are not part of conventional medicine because there is insufficient evidence of

safety and efficacy of such therapies. Alternative medicine is often defined as any healing practice "that does not fall within the realm of conventional medicine.<sup>1</sup> Alternative therapy is nonstandard treatment used in place of traditional methods/ standard medical treatments. It is frequently grouped with complementary medicine or integrative medicine, which generally refers to the same interventions when used in conjunction with mainstream techniques under the umbrella term 'complementary and alternative medicine.'<sup>2,3</sup> Alternative therapies are generally used in place of conventional medicine based on historical or cultural traditions, rather than a scientific basis. The American National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) defines CAM as a group of diverse medical and health care systems, practices, and products that are not generally considered part of conventional medicine and cites examples including Naturopathy, Chiropractic Medicine, Herbalism, Traditional Chinese Medicine and others.<sup>4</sup> A few studies are available on opinions of alternative therapists regarding CAM. Views of CAM practitioners on CAM in case of chronic low back pain are available.<sup>5</sup> Providers indicated they manage their patients' expectations in a number of domains— roles and responsibilities of providers and patients, treatment outcomes, timeframe for improvement, and treatment experience.<sup>5</sup>

Opinions of cancer patients regarding CAM, spirituality and holistic care are available in our earlier papers.<sup>7,8</sup> However, there is a paucity of research on views of alternative therapist and CAM practitioners on these aspects particularly in case of cancer. Practitioners' willingness to acknowledge that patients are seeking CAM is often based on their own professional and personal experience with therapies.<sup>9</sup> Better understanding of opinions of alternative therapists and responses to their patients' expectations are very important research areas. Present study was conducted with the objective to explore awareness, perceptions and beliefs of health care providers regarding alternative therapies.

#### Methods

Information concerning qualitative aspects was collected from alternative therapists providing CAM to cancer patients. They were interviewed for collecting their background information and their views in depth regarding several aspects of CAM. Their opinions, perceptions and beliefs regarding CAM in cancer cure were explored by conducting personal interviews using semi-structured interview schedules. Study variables included knowledge, perceptions, and perceived reliefs, cost-effectiveness of alternative therapies, perceived benefits, positive and negative motivations concerning CAM, misconceptions regarding cancer therapies and CAM, reasons behind popularity of CAM use.

#### Results:

The group consisted of total 244 CAM providers including 209 (85.7%) practitioners having some professional degrees whereas remaining 35(14.3%) were not having any professional degree. Out of them 121(49.6%) were experts from Ayurvedic and 54(22.1%) were Homeopathic Practitioners.

Some arguments in favor of CAM perceived by alternative therapists are presented in Table-1. The most common point in favor of CAM was having no side effects (77.5%) followed by close to nature (66.0%). Against the usual assumption of low cost involved in CAM therapies, only 97(39.8%) were of the opinion that these therapies are inexpensive. The most common argument in favor of usefulness in CAM therapies was observed to be "they improves/built the immune of the patient" (25.0%) followed by "to subside the side effects without any side effect" (14.3%). High toxicity of conventional treatment was the most common shortcoming reported by 194(79.5%) respondents followed by developing resistance with conventional treatments reported by 119(48.8%). There were 216(88.5%) respondents who were in favour of scientific evaluation of CAM therapies.

**TABLE-1: PERCEPTIONS OF ALTERNATIVE THERAPISTS REGARDING CAM**

Perceived benefits	No.	%
No side effects	189	77.5
Close to nature	161	66.0
Herbal medicines take care of health requirements of people	122	50.0
More effective	119	48.8
Easily available	108	44.3
Inexpensive	97	39.8
Blessings of God	89	36.5
More reliable	83	34.0
For quick and additional relief	47	19.3
No hope of life left	23	9.4
No modern medicine exists for cancer	22	9.0
As per social tradition	20	8.2
Others	31	12.7
Reasons behind popularity of CAM		
They improves/built the immune of the patient	61	25.0
Subsides the side effects without any side effect	35	14.3
It increases life expectancy, improves quality of life	27	11.1
Recovery of the patient is speedy with CAM methods	27	11.1
It works on the root of the disease	24	9.8
It is a supportive therapy	23	9.4
CAM treatment is pain less	13	5.3
It is a complete medicine and works just like allopathy	10	4.1
It concentrates on the patients not the disease	09	3.7
It can only prevent not cure	07	2.9
Effective the counseling	06	2.6
It creates the heat inside which helps in curing cancer (TMT)	07	2.9
They treat the origin of the disease	03	1.2
CAM helps to reduce or eliminate the disease it self	03	1.2
CAM is not working for curing cancer	02	0.8
Its acts as supplementary medicine along with allopathic treatment	05	2.0
Its work naturally with nature/natural body	04	1.6
Its heals the side effect of chemo	03	1.2
Its cures the disease from roots	05	2.0
No response	18	7.4
Short comings of conventional/allopathic treatment	No.	%

Conventional treatments are highly toxic	194	79.5
Conventional treatments develop resistance with course of time	119	48.8
Impair quality of life	104	42.6
Any other	43	17.6
CAM therapies should be evaluated scientifically		
Yes	216	88.5
No	25	10.2
No response	3	1.2

#### Discussion:

Efforts have been made in this study incorporating opinions of alternative therapists regarding CAM including Tibetan System of Medicine (TSM) through qualitative in-depth individual interviews and focus group discussions. This survey was helpful in exploring views of respondents concerning awareness, perceptions and beliefs of alternative therapists practicing different CAM therapies. Out of 244 therapists, 49.6% were from Ayurvedic 22.1% homeopathic practitioners and 17.2% from Tibetan System of Medicine (TSM). The most common argument in favor of CAM was having no side effects (77.5%) followed by close to nature (66.0%). More efficacy (48.8%) and easy availability (44.3%) were also among positive notions in favor of CAM. High toxicity of traditional/conventional therapies came out to be the most common shortcoming of those therapies, favoring use of alternative therapies. Various other views advocating as well as discouraging this treatment were also expressed. This study may be beneficial for health planners to have idea regarding popularity of CAM use in cancer without supportive scientific evidence while formulating a policy related with CAM. Treatment guidelines may be suitably modified under Indian situations suggesting a holistic approach to treat cancer patients. In spite of several strength, present study suffered several limitations. There is possibility of under representation of some therapies due to reluctance of some alternative therapist practicing in different fields to take part in the study in spite of our best efforts. There is likelihood of biased perceptions of selected therapists towards their respective therapies.

#### Conclusions and Suggestions:

The study provided perceived supportive evidence in favour of CAM for treating cancer patients based on opinions of alternative therapists. Importance of healing of cancer patients is felt through addressing spiritual needs of cancer patients based on their opinions. There is a need of continuous scientific evaluation of beneficial effects of CAM therapies. Study also suggests need of formal training of CAM practitioners for improving spiritual health of cancer patients. Further in depth epidemiological studies should be conducted for better understanding and evaluation of spirituality and healing for cancer patients in Indian set-up.

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#### Conflict of interest: None declared

Ethical approval: The study was approved by the Institutional Ethics Committee Government Medical College and Hospital (GMCH), Chandigarh. Authors acknowledge IEC, GMCH Chandigarh for giving approval.

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