
Complementary and Alternative Healing in Paradise: The State of the State

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Think about it! A study by David Eisenberg, M.D., Director of the Center of Alternative Medicine at Harvard, found that in the United States there are now more visits each year to alternative medicine providers than to primary care medical doctors. Think about it, again! In 1997 that number stood at over 600 million visits. We also know that Americans are paying

more dollars out-of-pocket for alternative medicine services than we are paying out-of-pocket for all U.S. hospitalizations. For instance, in 1997 Americans paid roughly 27 billion dollars for complementary and alternative services.

Preliminary studies on the use of complementary medicine in Hawaii indicate that trends within the state are at least comparable to growth on the mainland. This stands to reason. Hawaii has its own rich native healing tradition. In addition, the islands are a melting pot, in many ways a gateway to the East. As such, the state itself is the source of so much we are seeking to blend when we speak of conventional medicine and complementary/alternative modalities.

My own ancestors are all from the other side of the world, from Russia. After passing through immigration at Ellis Island one hundred years ago, my great-grandmother opened a candy shop in the Lower East Side of New York. She sold dozens of confections for every taste. Exploring alternatives in healthcare is not unlike being in a candy shop or maybe a crack seed store. We first have to ask, "What do you have? What's available?" In Hawaii there are four licensed complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) professions:

Naturopaths: Among the CAM professions, licensure for Naturopaths requires the most extensive training. This training has many similarities with medical school. Naturopaths do not prescribe pharmaceuticals and do not perform surgery. Instead they focus on the healing power of nature and care for their patients with a strong focus on lifestyle. Herbal treatment is a mainstay of care and, depending on specialty interests, naturopaths may also practice homeopathy, acupuncture, counseling and various modalities of "hands on"/manual medicine. In Hawaii, Naturopathy is a small but vibrant profession.

Chiropractic: Chiropractic focuses on supporting the alignment of the spine. The premise is that correct alignment supports a healthy nervous system and good health in general. In Hawaii, the chiropractic profession is well-established, highly organized and well-utilized.

Acupuncture: Acupuncture is by far the fastest growing CAM

profession. It is based on the concept that channels of energy, called meridians, run in regular patterns through the body. In order to maintain and restore health, the acupuncture practitioner inserts needles to help keep these channels in balance. Hawaii schools of acupuncture are working to provide quality education and to establish appropriate use of professional titles. Unfortunately, Hawaii also remains the only state in the United States in which your medical doctor cannot practice acupuncture under a medical license. This represents a serious access issue that many hope will be addressed in the next legislative session.

Massage: Massage is the fourth licensed profession. It is the largest with respect to the number of active licensees. There is a tremendous range in how massage therapists practice and the techniques they use. Most modalities can be loosely grouped into medical massage, deep tissue work, energy work and meridian based therapies.

Insurance coverage: Let's assume that you've chosen to see one of these CAM licensed practitioners for your healthcare needs. What is likely to be covered by your medical insurance? The good news is that insurance access is increasing. For example, HMSA and Kaiser combined comprise roughly 80% of the Hawaii insurance market. For approximately one year now, Kaiser has offered an optional supplemental rider for complementary services. HMSA now offers a discount program. HMAA and UHA also offer CAM programs. Over the years, Workers' Compensation and No Fault (PIP) automobile insurance have also covered the licensed professions. All four licensed professions are available under Workers' Compensation. Three are covered under PIP; naturopathy was pulled from the No Fault law in 1998. Overall, these increased insurance offerings represent a profound qualitative increase in access for the people of Hawaii.

What about Hawaiian healing? Although not formally licensed, Hawaiian spiritual healing is also reimbursed by these insurance policies. This may include: hands on lomi lomi, hooponopono, a type of counseling or lauau lapaau, and the use of herbal pharmacology. Of course, Hawaiian healing cannot be reduced to the modalities just enumerated. It is the underlying fabric, the life view, the mana that it draws from, that is Hawaiian healing.

Are licensed practitioners the only CAM professionals? We've been speaking about the licensed professions. Licensure provides some benefits in terms of being able to identify practitioners who have formal credentials. Yet there are downsides to licensure. For example, many argue that it is inappropriate to try to license those who have studied an oral tradition passed on through a lineage by

apprenticeship. Popular unlicensed professions include Yoga, Chi Gung, Tai Chi and multiple traditions that address the mind's role in the cause and course of illness.

Where do I begin? What type of modality and which practitioner should I try? In the information age there is so much one can do independently. Gather information. Use the internet. You may contact professional societies to check on a particular practitioner or to get names for a referral. If you have selected a practitioner you might want to work with, ask the practitioner about past training, qualifications, past experiences with your condition, and scope of practice.

The Integrative Medicine Consult: More and more it is possible to obtain specialty consultations in Integrative Medicine. Patients' current conditions and past treatments are evaluated and recommendations are made regarding traditional approaches as well as complementary and alternative modalities that may be of benefit.

A caveat: If you are seeing a CAM practitioner, it is important that you advise your primary medical doctor that you are seeking medical alternatives. For example, drug-herb interactions can occur. Keeping this kind of information from your physician can result in adverse outcomes.

Epilogue: One of the best ways to nourish oneself and restore health is to trust the messages coming from your own body. There is so much information that becomes available when we listen to these signals. But bear in mind: There are a number of silent killers. For instance, diabetes, hypertension and high cholesterol don't physically hurt. Unless you are at extreme levels of blood pressure or blood sugar, there are no particular sensations associated with these problems being out of control.

Ultimately, optimum health is often not simply about taking the right pill, or undergoing a certain surgical procedure. It is not only about taking the right herb or the right medication. It's not just about getting the right neck adjustment or having acupuncture needles placed in the skin. It is about mana, chi, ki, prana. It is about balance. It is about partnership, communication, relationship, and quality self-care. In general, we need to trust ourselves more and commit ourselves to living our lives in a way that keeps us healthy. This is the best way to integrate alternatives in health and the best way to optimize healing in paradise.

References

Eisenberg DM, et al. Trends in Alternative Medicine Use in the United States 1990-1997. *New Engl J Med*. 1998;280:1569-1575.



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- If you suspect a poisoning, do not wait for signs and symptoms to develop. Call the Hawaii Poison Center immediately.
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- Store all medicines, chemicals, and household products out of reach and out of sight, preferably locked up.
- A good rule to teach children is to "always ask first" before eating or drinking anything—don't touch, don't smell, don't taste.

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