



## Integrative and complementary medicine

**To the Editor:** The comments in your recent editorial<sup>1</sup> require further elaboration.

You noted the popularity of Complementary Medicine worldwide, and this does seem to cause a great deal of incredulousness among many colleagues. However there is very good reason for the growing popularity of Complementary Medicine, and why increasing numbers of medical doctors have begun to include the various techniques (acupuncture, manipulations) and remedies (herbal, nutritional and homeopathic) into a broader health-promoting philosophy called Integrative Medicine (IM). The latter approach is not opposed to drugs and surgery but involves a more holistic viewpoint; it is not only about the psychosocial aspects of ill health but encompasses an energetic/informational paradigm and specialises in supporting health while treating disease when appropriate. IM is not just another name for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM). It is a medicine that has at last freed itself from many of the ideas and belief systems of CAM, and the more narrow disease viewpoint of conventional medicine which uses drugs and surgery as its primary focus. IM is not about 'alternative', nor is it just about using natural medicines. It honours experience as it does experiment; it recognises the unique nature of each individual and therefore understands that each person requires a unique and individualised approach; it understands the limits of medical science<sup>2</sup> and that that which cannot be measured also has an influence on the pathogenesis of the illness; and it recognises that human beings are more than body and biochemistry and that electromagnetism and information carried by this energy must eventually be incorporated into the biochemical viewpoint. IM uses natural medicines to support and optimise health. The more health the less ill health; nevertheless drugs and surgery may also be useful and even essential.

So why is IM becoming increasingly popular even among medical doctors, why do so many members of the public go to alternative practitioners, and why are complementary medicines used in increasing amounts?

The reasons are not difficult to understand.

There is an increasing perception that drugs are chemicals with many side-effects. Hospital-acquired infections are serious and even life threatening. Surgery is invasive and does not always solve the problem. Depending on the literature one reads, iatrogenic disease is now the third<sup>3</sup> or even most common cause of ill health.<sup>4</sup> Doctors know very little about lifestyle management, diet and nutritional supplements. The fact that an ordinary Ohmmeter can pick up electrical currents all over the body seems unimportant despite the fact that biochemistry has not resolved the problem of ill health. Patients often know more than their doctors and don't even bother to

discuss this with their doctors, whom they often see as narrow-minded and biased. The public is generally clear that while natural medicines may have side-effects, these risks are very small compared with the risk of taking drugs.

I am proud to be a medical doctor and have an enormous respect for the advancements of medical science. But good science, I believe, includes the knowledge that much is unknown – to believe that what is unknown does not exert a great influence on what is known is a very arrogant attitude, and is not good science but scientism. It is at the frontiers or borders of our knowledge, where science cannot go, that human experience becomes valuable – it may in fact be the only way to explore this area. It is here, perhaps, that sangomas, shamans and other sensitives operate, and it is here that common folk experience the presence of their God. This is the domain of metaphysics – the place where science cannot go but where human beings live.

### Bernard Brom

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2. Brom B. The limits of medical science. *S Afr Med J* 2006; 95: 35-38.
3. Starfield B. Is the US health really the best in the world? *JAMA* 2000; 284: 483-485.
4. Null G, Dean C, Feldman M, et al. Death by medicine. [www.mercola.com/2003/nov/26/death\\_by\\_medicine\\_ref.htm](http://www.mercola.com/2003/nov/26/death_by_medicine_ref.htm)

*Dr Brom's case for the acceptance of IM is flawed. Firstly, there is only one 'medicine', and all other systems that aspire to mainstream recognition latch onto words that seem to align them with medicine.*

*That IM is 'more holistic' and 'specialises in supporting health' is the standard and unjust claim of alternative systems in their direct or implied criticism of medicine.*

*That 'drugs are chemicals with many side-effects' is obvious, and the pharmaceutical texts and package inserts are explicit about these dangers.*

*'Electrical currents' are not considered unimportant and, for instance, are used as standard diagnostic and therapeutic measures for the heart and brain.*

*A common flaw is to equate 'natural' with good or healthy – however, natural products can be as dangerous as synthesised products.*

*Modern medicine has freed itself from the tyranny of beliefs by requiring proof of the efficacy of any intervention. The fact that a belief has been held for a long time is not proof of its validity, e.g. blood-letting and purging held sway for centuries. The fact that patients express feelings of improvement of their condition may also be false – such as the clamour for Virodene as a cure for AIDS, despite proof that it was merely a toxic solvent. Alternative systems invariably fail such scrutiny.*

*What, then, is the main reason for the popularity of alternative systems? Dr Brom gets closer to the truth in his final paragraph when he touches on the people ('sensitives') who feed the belief systems of vulnerable people. IM and fellow travellers have no special powers to*