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Integrating integrative medicine

BY DR. JULIE T. CHEN, M.D.



Dr. Julie, I've heard the term "integrative medicine" a lot recently. What is it and how does it differ from the practices of conventional medicine?

I am frequently asked by friends and acquaintances what integrative medicine is all about. Since we've all grown up in an environment where conventional medicine is the norm, it's not surprising that this burgeoning field of medicine is at the same time both exciting and confusing to people.

The name integrative medicine pretty much describes what this field is about. **Essentially, integrative medicine physicians like to integrate both conventional and alternative medicine treatment options into the care of any given patient.** I like to explain it as a method of medicine where we evaluate a patient's therapeutic options. We like to utilize both conventional and alternative medicine options in such a way that we use what we can from both modalities to achieve an optimal health outcome.

In order to do this I like to treat the person as a whole. While some believe it is necessary to segment the body into sub-specialties, most people can't argue that at least one of the physicians caring for any given patient needs to put all the parts together and treat the patient as a whole. That's where integrative physicians come in.

Most primary care physicians do this, but most integrative physicians take into account the significance of the patient's diet, environmental and social triggers, religious considerations, personal beliefs, and prior physical and emotional traumas.

In all fairness, the way present medicine is set up there just isn't enough time for most primary care physicians to delve into those areas of a patient's life—even if he or she wanted to do so. It's nearly impossible to get all the basic medical information in 15-minute office visits, let alone thoroughly document all the psychosocial-environmental-nutritional factors that can also affect overall health.

That's why there's been a growing interest in the field of integrative medicine so that other fields can help out

the already over-worked primary care physicians who are already doing their best to care for the whole patient.

Another facet of integrative medicine that is different from conventional medicine is the types of therapeutic options that are offered to patients. I consider it my job to make sure that I guide and manage alternative therapeutic options so that my patients are safe. For example, while I am in favor of most alternative therapies such as chiropractic therapy, ayurvedic medicine and acupuncture—to name a few modalities—there are various treatment options within each category that may not be safe for any given patient. It is my job to guide patients to know what is safe and not safe based on their specific medical history.

Many patients also may not be able to tolerate various medications and thus supplements and herbs, or vitamins and minerals, may be better options. Several physicians refer patients to me for management of supplements and to help patients with their diet so that they can safely use food as medicine instead of a potentially dangerous medication that the patient cannot tolerate.

When people ask me what exactly is integrative medicine, my usual response is that my job is to guide patients toward living as healthily as possible, using whatever means is available in all the healing modalities we are able to access today. I see conventional medicine and alternative medicine not as opposing versions of health care, but rather that the combination of the two is just medicine—in essence they are just two halves of a whole.

I believe that when you separate them into discrete categories, as if they are antagonists, it just puts limits on two equally important healthcare options for patients seeking to achieve their optimal health. ▣

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