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Alternative Medicine

Three millennia ago, medicine began as a purely religious practice completely detached from science (Nelson, 1961). Today, it seems that we cannot make any medical progress without scientific knowledge. In fact, the most significant medical discoveries and inventions in history including antibiotics and antivirals, various imaging mechanisms, and surgical techniques like organ transplantation have hinged on science more than any other discipline (Childs & Kansagra, 2007). However, this has led to an increasing tendency to take what the scientists say for granted and neglect the traditional style of performing medical care. This is the reason we label all non-standard or non-western medicine as “alternative medicine” (Saks, 2018), which automatically carries the negative connotation that this type of medicine is not legitimate. While we should always be skeptical, I argue that we should not disregard medicine simply because it is labeled alternative nor accept medicine because it is standard. I believe that the effectiveness and trustworthiness of medicine should be viewed as a continuum rather than based on generic categories of standard or alternative.

Firstly, consider the fact that “alternative medicine” is defined to be any type of medicine that is not standard. There are several problems with this definition, but one that particularly stands out is that “standard medicine” is not well-defined. It is fairly common to consider standard medicine to be medicine prescribed by a physician, but two physicians don’t necessarily agree on what can or cannot be prescribed. Especially if we consider the fact that medicine is

practiced around the world, cultural differences and differences in medical technology greatly affect what physicians are generally allowed to prescribe in one country as compared to another. For example, in Japan, it is fairly common for a doctor that practices conventional medicine to recommend treatments that are considered alternative in the United States. In fact, most Japanese people do not use the terminology “alternative” to describe medicine in general. The more common labels are “western” versus “eastern” medicine, where western medicine is similar to what is considered standard medicine in the U.S. and eastern medicine is more alternative including traditional Chinese medicine like acupuncture and herbal treatment (Tsuei, 1978). Growing up in Japan, my parents made me take a type of traditional herbal medicine called “kampo” whenever I got sick. Although “kampo” would be considered alternative in the U.S., it is one of the most common over-the-counter drugs used to treat the common cold in Japan, especially for children because it is believed to be more natural with less harmful side effects. In general, while some medicine is considered “standard” and the rest “alternative” in the United States, the two types are viewed as different approaches in Japan where one is not necessarily superior to the other.

Even with such problems in trying to define medicine as “alternative”, some people argue that a certain distinction is necessary between medicine produced based on a scientific method and those which are not. Their fundamental belief is that science is more trustworthy than other disciplines and therefore medicine based on a scientific method should be superior to other approaches to medicine. The problem is that just because a certain type of medicine was generated using a scientific method does not mean that its effectiveness is scientifically proven. As consumers, we expect the effectiveness of standard medicine to be scientifically proven, but this is often not the case. A study performed in 2007 published on the British Medical Journal

investigated around 2500 common medical treatments and concluded that only 13% were found to be beneficial and an additional 23% likely to be beneficial (Ullman, 2017). The effectiveness of the other 64% was either unknown or outweighed by harmful side effects. Moreover, history has shown that new research has always debunked old claims causing a paradigm shift in the scientific community, and this trend is especially apparent in the medical world. In some cases, common, conventional medicine is declared ineffective or even harmful within a decade or so.

One major example in history that highlights the danger of taking “scientific medicine” for granted is the “miracle” weight-loss drug fen-phen. Fen-phen was a combination of fenfluramine, an appetite depressant, and phentermine, a type of amphetamine, both previously approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for short-term diet aid (Kolata, 1997). When Dr. Michael Weintraub performed an experiment on 121 obese patients demonstrating the effectiveness of fen-phen in 1979, the drug combination rose to incredible popularity based on this single study. It was not until the 1990’s that some doctors discovered that the particular drug combination caused heart valve defects in as much as third of the patients, and fen-phen was finally taken off the market in 1997 by the FDA. By that point, an estimated six million Americans have taken the drug with a number of them reporting the suspected heart valve defects. Fenfluramine and phentermine had both undergone extensive testing before FDA approval, and Dr. Weintraub employed a scientific method during his experiment using dummy pills and controlling other variables as much as possible, but the result was a harmful drug that impacted millions of people who took this “scientific approach” for granted. Therefore, we should not trust conventional medicine simply because it is “standard” or “scientific”.

One other significant problem in using the term “alternative medicine” is that it encapsulates a broad range of treatments that should not be grouped together. Just as

conventional medicine differs from treatment to treatment, the nature and effectiveness of alternative medicine varies as well. Treatments like acupuncture, chiropractic, and homeopathy are clearly within the realm of medicine, but even activities such as tai chi or yoga, dietary supplements and other nutritional approaches, and various forms of meditation are all different types of alternative medicine (Finke & Garilli, 2018). Clearly, you cannot analyze the effectiveness of acupuncture in the same way you analyze the effectiveness of yoga, for instance, because they pertain to distinct areas within the biological sciences. Thus, we are unlikely to reach any conclusions about alternative medicine in general, just as we were not able to reach a general conclusion regarding the effectiveness of conventional medicine.

Nonetheless, people argue against alternative medicine by claiming that this type of medicine is either disproved or unprovable by science. In particular, they point to the religious, ritualistic practices from which traditional medicine originate to claim that the treatment has no scientific relevance. For instance, most traditional Chinese medicine is based on the concept of maintaining balance of an invisible life energy called “qi” (NCCIH, 2017). Popular forms of alternative medicine such as acupuncture and herbal treatment have an embedded historical background that they originate from the spiritual practice of attempting to prevent disturbances and encourage the flow of qi. Given this information, the critics of alternative medicine point to the fact that these treatments are not scientifically motivated and are thus inferior to modern medicine. However, some alternative medicine has been subject to extensive scientific testing, and in some cases, studies have discovered evidence supporting its effectiveness. For example, chiropractic originates from the idea that the spine is the central flow of a person’s life energy, and that you can improve the condition of your body holistically by spinal manipulations. Due to this philosophical origin, chiropractic is considered an alternative medicine. Yet, some recent

studies have shown that chiropractic actually helps alleviate low-back pain and other spinal problems as well as conditions such as asthma and headaches (NCCIH, 2018). I, for one, believe chiropractic is at least temporarily effective as I saw a chiropractor when I developed lumbar spondylolysis (low-back spinal splitting) when I was a teenager, and my dull pain seemed to vanish every time I saw the chiropractor. Chiropractic and several other types of alternative medicine have found scientific evidence for their effectiveness just like any standard medicine, and thus the label of “alternative medicine” seems no longer appropriate.

Therefore, alternative medicine should not be disregarded simply because it is alternative, and standard medicine should not be automatically accepted because it is standard. There were many instances in history where standard medicine was ineffective or harmful, and even now, more than half of commonly consumed drugs are not scientifically shown to be effective. On the other hand, alternative medicine encapsulates a broad spectrum of treatments, some of which have evidence for their effectiveness despite their non-scientific historic origin. All in all, I think medical doctors should have the right to prescribe or recommend any type of medicine they think is appropriate for the patient regardless of whether it is alternative or not. In fact, “alternative medicine” is a misleading term and should be replaced by the idea of a spectrum of different types of medicine where each treatment differs in its use and effectiveness. Medical doctors should study all types of medicine and treatment so that they can propose what is best for each individual patient. Only by removing the stigma on alternative medicine can we say that healthcare is truly fair and optimal for the people.

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