

Challenges in Defining Alternative Medicine

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Description

Alternative practices are based on theories that contradict the science of how the human body works; others resort to the supernatural or superstitious to explain their effect. In others, the practice is plausibly effective but has too many side effects. Alternative medicine is distinct from scientific medicine, which employs the scientific method to test plausible therapies by way of responsible and ethical clinical trials, producing evidence of either effect or of no effect. Research into alternative therapies often fails to follow proper research protocols (such as placebo-controlled trials, blind experiments, and calculation of prior probability), providing invalid results.

Prominent members of the science and biomedical science community say that it is not meaningful to define an alternative medicine that is separate from a conventional medicine, because the expressions "Conventional Medicine", "Alternative Medicine", "Complementary Medicine", "Integrative Medicine", and "Holistic Medicine" do not refer to any medicine at all. Others say that alternative medicine cannot be precisely defined because of the diversity of theories and practices it includes, and because the boundaries between alternative and conventional medicine overlap, are porous, and change. Healthcare practices categorized as alternative may differ in their historical origin, theoretical basis, diagnostic technique, therapeutic practice and in their relationship to the medical mainstream. Under a definition of alternative medicine as "non-mainstream", treatments considered alternative in one location may be considered conventional in another [1-3].

Critics say the expression is deceptive because it implies there is an effective alternative to science-based medicine, and that complementary is deceptive because it implies that the treatment increases the effectiveness of (complements) science-based medicine, while alternative medicines that have been tested nearly always have no measurable positive effect compared to a placebo. "There is really no such thing as alternative medicine, just medicine that works and medicine that doesn't", a notion later echoed by Paul Offit: "the truth is there's no such thing as conventional or alternative or complementary or integrative or holistic medicine. There's only medicine that works and medicine that does not. And the best way to sort it out is by carefully evaluating scientific studies - not by visiting Internet chat rooms, reading magazine articles, or talking to friends." Comedian Tim Minchin has also taken to the issue in his viral animation short Storm: "Alternative medicine has either not been proved to work or been proved not to work."

Alternative medicine may discourage people from getting the best possible treatment. Those having experienced or perceived success with one alternative therapy for a minor ailment may be convinced of its efficacy and persuaded to extrapolate that success to some other alternative therapy for a more serious, possibly life-threatening illness. For this reason, critics argue that therapies that rely on the placebo effect to define success are very dangerous [4,5].

Alternative medicine consists of a wide range of health care practices, products, and therapies. The shared feature is a claim to heal that is not based on the scientific method. Alternative medicine practices are diverse in their foundations and methodologies. Alternative medicine practices may be classified by their cultural origins or by the types of beliefs upon which they are based. Methods may incorporate or be based on traditional medicinal practices of a particular culture, folk knowledge, superstition, spiritual beliefs, belief in supernatural energies (anti science), pseudoscience, errors in reasoning, propaganda, fraud, new or different concepts of health and disease, and any bases other than being proven by scientific methods. Different cultures may have their own unique traditional or belief based practices developed recently or over thousands of years, and specific practices or entire systems of practices.

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