

## Alternative therapies slowly gain medical community's respect

By [ALLAN DRURY](#)  
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Doctors tried loading Jai Ramsawak up with antibiotics and the steroid prednisone, but the phlegm kept coming up every fall when his condition, first diagnosed as bronchitis and then as asthma, would flare up so severely that he considered shutting his business and moving his family to another climate.

A relative suggested that Ramsawak try acupuncture and herbal supplements to knock back the symptoms, which would dog him through the winter. Since he was getting no results from the conventional medicine, he decided to give it a try and scheduled an appointment with Ron Hershey, who runs East Mountain Acupuncture in Croton-on-Hudson and Cold Spring.

Soon after he began getting acupuncture treatments and taking the herbs Hershey recommended, Ramsawak felt better. Eight years later, he is free of respiratory problems and is planning to train to run a marathon. He still sees Hershey, but now it's for help managing his cholesterol level.

"I don't know how acupuncture works," Ramsawak, 49, of Yonkers, said. "It's not logical to me, but I've kept seeing Ron and I seem to keep getting better."

Acupuncturists like Hershey, who has been in practice since 1997, are foot soldiers in a fight to convince the mainstream medical community and public at large that alternative treatments can sometimes succeed where conventional medicine fails.

Alternative health treatments generally include anything that is not fully embraced by the mainstream medical profession. The definition can include acupuncture, herbs, homeopathy, massage, colonics, prayer, marijuana (as a pain reliever) and dozens of other treatments.

The providers claim their methods can help everything from cancer to constipation, from diabetes to depression. They hawk treatments they swear can make colds vanish faster and sex last longer.

Some, such as acupuncturists and chiropractors, have made huge strides in gaining acceptance from physicians and insurance companies. Herbal remedies, once regarded as a fad embraced only by New Age eccentrics, now line shelves in the stores of many large retailers.

Hershey said his methods are an easier sell with prospective patients than when he started practicing.

"I don't really think I have to convince anyone anymore," he said. "After 10 years in practice, I'm amazed at how many people are referred to us by (physicians)."

But the medical community is more skeptical of colonics, magnet therapy, homeopathy and other alternative methods, some of which are largely practiced by unlicensed, unregulated providers who have done little more than attend some classes and hang out a shingle announcing they're open for business.



Stuart Bayer/The Journal News Seth Harrison/The Jo

Ron Hershey places acupuncture needles into patient Maureen Cotter of Beacon, N.Y., at his Cold Spring office. Bobbi Pollack performs Reiki, a Japanese method of healing, on Jo Kestenbaum of Somers in Pollack's home in Hawthorne.

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recognized by any governmental body. Those in the medical profession toss around terms like "quackery" and "pseudoscience" to describe some of these alternative treatments.

An American Medical Association policy says: "There is little evidence to confirm the safety or efficacy of most alternative therapies. Much of the information currently known about these therapies makes clear that many have not been shown to be (effective)."

The policy also says doctors should ask their patients whether they're getting or considering alternative treatments. Patients who are getting such treatments should learn the hazards of postponing or stopping conventional medical treatment, the association says.

Statistics on the size of the alternative health industry are hard to come by. But it's clear that it's large and that some segments have grown rapidly.

- Sales of herbs totaled \$4.41 billion in 2005, compared with \$2.27 billion 10 years earlier, according to the American Botanical Council.

- The number of licensed acupuncturists in the country has more than tripled to 26,000 and an additional 8,100 people are studying acupuncture, said Will Morris, the president emeritus of the American Association of Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine. There are more than 50 acupuncture schools, compared with fewer than five in 1983, he said.

- A 2002 government study found 36 percent of U.S. adults used a form of alternative treatment, not counting prayer. Surveys have also found many people do not tell their physician they are seeking an alternative treatment.

- When compared to the results of a 1997 Harvard Medical School study, the 2002 study showed a shift in the kind of treatments people were choosing had taken place. The biggest was a gain of 50 percent in the number of people using herbs.

Alternative treatments have grown in popularity as conventional medicine has proved itself effective in treating infectious diseases and trauma but not as effective in treating chronic conditions, said James C. Wharton, a professor at the University of Washington in Seattle and author of the book "Nature Cures: The History of Alternative Medicine in America."

"The picture of disease that is affecting American society has shifted toward chronic illnesses like diabetes and arthritis and a range of conditions that can't be cured," he said. "The best we can do is manage them and in a lot of cases things aren't managed all that well, so people are looking for ways (besides traditional medicine) to try to cope more effectively."

Wharton said he believes many patients have turned to alternative treatments out of frustration with the way doctors interact with them. Alternative providers, who often stress a holistic approach that emphasizes mental and emotional wellness as essential to physical recovery, fill that void, he said.

Defining the universe of alternative treatments is extremely subjective. Wharton said that in researching his book he saw an estimate that there are some 300 alternatives to conventional treatments.

"I'm sure you could come up with a few hundred more," he said.

Wharton said he believes that chiropractic care, acupuncture and naturopathic medicine are the three alternative forms of treatment that have gained the most acceptance from the medical mainstream. Medical doctors generally regard chiropractic care as effective only for treating back pain and acupuncture for treating certain pain and nausea, he said.

Inside Bobbi Pollack's Hawthorne home, clients lie on a massage table in a room filled with the aroma of flowers and lit by candles.

Pollack says a silent prayer and moves her hands over her clients, sometimes touching them.

It's called Reiki (pronounced Ray-key), and it's a Japanese form of stress relief. Practitioners believe Reiki balances a person's energy centers or chakras. "Energy" passes from the practitioner's hands into person's "energy centers," adherents believe.

The stress often makes people feel relief from physical maladies, Pollack said, though she does not pitch her service as a substitute for medical care.

"Usually when people get a treatment, they feel better," she said. "If they have pain, they have less pain (following the treatment) or they have no pain (following the treatment)," she said.

Asked about the skeptics' view that it is impossible for energy to move from her hands to the

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client's body, she said: "They're skeptical because they can't see it. It's something that's beyond the five senses."

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