

TECHNICAL INFORMATION

TERMINOLOGY IN HOLISTIC MEDICINE

An holistic approach to health is a rapidly expanding field. It is estimated that around 60% of the population now regularly use products or services which may be termed 'alternative' 'complementary' or 'holistic' for themselves, and it naturally follows that an increasing number of people are now using them for their pets. Terminology in this field can be confusing and often, understandably, gets muddled. This obviously makes communication difficult.

It is strange to think that up to the 1930's holistic medicine was commonly practiced by both doctors and veterinary surgeons although in those days there was no distinction between conventional and other types of medicine in the same way as there is today. Virtually all medicines were based on plants or other natural substances which had been proven through regular use for countless generations. These ranged from simple cough remedies such as liquorice, to powerful painkillers such as morphine. Nutrition was a key part of medicine and little distinction was made between food and medicine. Examination of the patient's stools was a routine part of diagnosis and care.

Since the middle of the last century, the pharmaceutical industry has been responsible for many remarkable advances in certain areas of health care, but it has also been responsible for the polarisation of medicine and nutrition. Despite the fact that medicines continued to be based on plants, as the pharmaceutical industry developed, it saw to it that anything which was not a technological medicine, and therefore not patentable, was debunked as 'non-scientific'. The focus was firmly set on 'silver bullets' to cure all disease and any other approach was unworthy of scientific attention. Nutrition, which had been at centre stage of prevention and cure since the days of Hippocrates, was now largely thought irrelevant.

As the pharmaceutical industry debased the traditional medical culture, its language was also destroyed. Terminology which had evolved over the centuries lay unused for a generation and fell out of use. Following the resurgence of interest in holistic medicine and nutrition, almost a new language is developing. Some of this embraces the old language and some of it involves the introduction of new terms. The language is evolving of course and can be confusing and/or misleading. Here are a few terms, the meaning of which are worth considering -

Alternative medical system

A system of medicine which may be used in place of the existing medical system. System is the key word here; Traditional Chinese Medicine is an alternative to modern western medicinal systems, however various disciplines within it, such as acupuncture are only a part of TCM. When they are used in

conjunction with western systems they become complementary or alternative therapies.

Alternative medical therapies or medicines

Therapies or medicines which may be used in place of what may be regarded as normal in the existing medical system. These tend to change over time; for example, osteopathy, when it was first introduced by the American doctor Andrew Still at the end of the last century, was an alternative therapy. Today it is a mainstream medical profession.

Complementary

A system of medicine or individual therapy which may be used as part of or in association with the other therapies employed. For example physiotherapy may be used as a complementary therapy to help a patient recover mobility after orthopaedic surgery.

Consultant

A specialist in a particular field whose opinion is sought by others. They may have expertise in any field, medical or not.

Conventional medicine

Conventional medicine today generally concentrates on suppressing the symptoms of disease and does not focus on the cause. It employs the use of synthetic chemicals and drugs as a first option.

Doctor

A physician usually holds the courtesy title of 'doctor'. Only physicians registered with the appropriate professional body can carry out invasive procedures or prescribe state controlled drugs. Anyone who has a Doctor of Philosophy degree in any field is a doctor by right and not just by courtesy.

Heroic medicine

The employment of medicine that is dramatic and not without risk. Usually employed when there is imminent risk of severe consequences through inaction, such as in cases of acute illness or accident. Heroic medicine most often involves the use of relatively sophisticated synthetic drugs and one area where their use is of unquestionable value in saving lives. Whilst powerful physiological effects can be got through the use of natural medicines such as morphine, the development of instantly available highly predictable drug intervention for heroic medicine is one of the triumphs of the modern pharmaceutical industry.

Holistic medicine

In the biological sense, a concept based on the fundamental principle of nature the creation and maintenance of wholes or complete biological systems. Holistic medicine is generally that which, where there is a choice, employs therapies which are compatible with the evolved physiology of the species. Synthetically produced substances are used as a second option because, although they may be effective, there is always a pay-off in the form of side effects. Also in contrast to modern western technological medicine, holistic medicine focuses on prevention.

Homoeopath

Anyone using homoeopathy as a form of medicine. They may or may not be qualified in conventional medicine.

Homoeostasis

The physiological process which maintains, within certain limits, the equilibrium of the internal systems of the body. It is associated the body's powerful ability to heal itself if the conditions are optimal. This is one of the key aspects of holistic medicine. An holistic physician will endeavour to identify and remove the 'barriers to healing' be they physical, emotional or environmental. Whilst some holistic medicines can be used for heroic intervention, most are focused on maximising this natural phenomenon.

Integrated medicine

A relatively new term which embraces the spirit of the holistic medicine in that it seeks to understand and integrate therapies from a variety of paradigms and cultures, both old and new.

Medical Herbalist

A person trained in the use of herbs and other plants in medicine. They may or may not be registered physicians.

Natural

Any substance which exists in nature. This term is often used to distinguish between medicines made from naturally existing substances such as herbs and medicines made from synthetically produced substances. When used to describe herbal and other naturally derived medicines the term is often relative as many of these products are processed in some way.

Nutraceuticals

A food to which vitamins, minerals or drugs have been added to make them healthier, also called functional foods.

Nutritionist

One who has studies the effect of food on the body. Since there are no legal restrictions on the term, anyone can call themselves a nutritionist.

Organic

Food which have been scrutinised and approved by one of the organic certification bodies such as Demeter. Organic farming excludes the use of artificial fertiliser such as bagged nitrogen and also the routine use of drugs. It is based on small mixed farming principles, the fertility of soil being built up through the use of waste organic material. Animal welfare is also a prime concern.

Pharmacognocoy

The study of drugs derived from plants.

Physiotherapy

The use of physical methods to promote healing, including the use of light, heat, electric current, massage, manipulation, and remedial exercise.

Practitioner

The term used to be associated with veterinarians or doctors but is now used more generally to describe anyone practicing medicine whether they are conventionally medically qualified or not.

Protected term

In some areas certain terms are protected by law. For example a veterinarian must be licensed to practice otherwise he/she may not describe himself as such. This protectionism in veterinary surgery began in England during the 19th century. The Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons was set up to standardise the profession.

Synthetic

A chemical substance produced by man. Great advanced in chemistry enable us to produce a vast range of products which are used in a variety of situations every day to improve our lives. Pharmaceutical products used in food and medicines are synthetic chemicals. Many of these are modelled on natural chemical molecules found in plants.

For free technical information on integrated medicine and advice in specific circumstances contact: tech.help@bahnm.org.uk

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