

RESEARCH NOTE

BELIEF IN THE EFFICACY OF ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE AMONG GENERAL PRACTITIONERS IN THE NETHERLANDS

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Abstract—A survey among 293 GPs in the Netherlands showed that many believe in the efficacy of common alternative procedures. High scores were especially found for manual therapy, yoga, acupuncture, hot bath therapy and homoeopathy. Other procedures, such as iridology, faith healing and many food supplements, were considered less useful.

Key words—alternative medicine, efficacy, general practice, questionnaire

INTRODUCTION

Alternative medicine is quite popular among GPs in the United Kingdom [1-3]. An earlier study in the Netherlands showed that almost all GPs refer certain patients to alternative practitioners, and that half of them practice alternative medicine themselves (mostly homoeopathy) [4]. This policy may partly be caused by patients' pressure, financial motives or reluctance to prescribe pure placebos. However, this report shows that many GPs really believe in the efficacy of certain alternative procedures.

DOCTORS AND METHODS

From the register of GPs in the Netherlands a random sample of 400 doctors was drawn. In the summer of 1989 they received a postal questionnaire to state their belief in the efficacy of many alternative procedures [5]. It was stressed that our interest was in specific effects, beyond placebo effects, and that all procedures should be considered under optimum circumstances (complete compliance, expert practitioner). They could give their opinion on a scale from 0 to 10. The familiar report marks should not indicate perceived quantitative effects, but the degree of belief in any efficacy. Small but almost certain effects should be rated much higher than large but seriously doubted effects (say, 9 vs 2).

RESULTS

Five addresses turned out to be wrong. After two reminders the response was 74% or 293 doctors. Table 1 shows their scores (mean and distribution). In the text we only mention the percentage of positive scores (6-10); the width of its 95% confidence interval is approx. 10%. The scores of various alternative procedures are reported under seven headings.

Acupuncture

Especially for patients with chronic pain, acupuncture is considered efficacious by half of the doctors. Some 25% believe acupuncture to be a useful treatment for asthma or smoking addiction. Neural therapy is positively scored by 15%.

Homoeopathy

About 45% thinks that homoeopathic remedies are efficacious in the treatment of upper respiratory tract infections or hay fever. For chronic joint problems this is 30%. Anthroposophical medicine makes sense to 22%.

Spiritual techniques

Compared to acupuncture and homoeopathy doctors give less credit to faith healing (7%) or healing (17%). Nevertheless, 30% report to believe that hypnosis can help to quit smoking. For patients with psychological problems yoga appeals to 62%, and more conventional psychotherapy to 83%.

Manual techniques

Manual therapy in the Netherlands is generally not considered alternative medicine anymore. No less than 80% believes it to be efficacious in the treatment of patients with chronic neck or back problems, compared to 71% for conventional physiotherapy. Hot bath (Kurort) therapy is positively rated by 46% for rheumatic patients. With 14% reflexology (foot massage) scores much lower.

Natural remedies

Among the many available products we inquired after evening primrose oil (premenstrual syndrome, atopic eczema), garlic (cardiovascular disease) and ginseng (decreased vitality). Less than 10% considers them efficacious. The 'Moerman' diet is well-known

Table 1. Report marks of Dutch GPs for their belief in the efficacy of alternative medicine

Procedure	Indication	Mean score	Distribution (%)					No.*
			0-1	2-3	4-5	6-7	8-10	
Acupuncture	Chronic pain	5.0	12	12	26	36	14	291
Acupuncture	Asthma	3.1	35	19	23	17	5	279
Acupuncture	Smoking	3.7	26	22	24	20	8	288
Neural therapy	Pain	2.3	51	15	19	11	4	268
Homoeopathy	Upper respiratory infection	4.7	20	10	24	32	15	287
Homoeopathy	Hay fever	4.5	20	11	25	32	11	290
Homoeopathy	Chronic joint disease	3.7	26	19	25	22	7	287
Anthroposophy	General	3.2	35	17	25	18	4	271
Faith healing	General	1.5	65	17	11	4	3	282
Healing	General	2.6	43	18	23	14	3	287
Hypnosis	Smoking	3.6	28	18	24	26	4	275
Meditation, yoga	Psychological problems	5.6	7	11	21	43	19	290
Psychotherapy	Psychological problems	6.7	2	2	12	50	33	291
Physiotherapy	Chronic neck/back problems	6.3	3	4	21	43	28	290
Manual therapy	Chronic neck/back problems	6.4	4	4	12	47	33	289
Hot bath (Kurort)	Rheumatism	4.6	14	17	23	38	8	278
Reflexology	General	2.4	49	16	21	11	3	276
Evening primrose	Premenstrual syndrome	1.5	64	16	16	3	1	259
Evening primrose	Atopic eczema	1.6	62	15	17	4	2	258
Garlic	Cardiovascular disease	1.5	63	19	10	8	0	286
Ginseng	Decreased vitality	1.7	60	18	13	9	0	280
Moerman diet	Cancer	1.9	56	18	14	11	1	289
Calcium (megadose)	Cancer prevention	0.9	76	14	8	1	0	271
Beta-carotene	Cancer prevention	1.3	72	12	10	6	1	267
Vitamin C	Cancer prevention	1.6	62	17	12	7	3	280
Vitamin E	Atherosclerosis	1.3	68	17	10	5	0	275
Vitamin comb	General prevention	2.2	51	20	16	12	2	281
Vitamin C	Common cold	2.5	47	16	17	15	5	283
Vitamin B6	Premenstrual syndrome	3.9	28	15	22	25	11	282
Astrology	Diagnosis	0.8	80	12	4	3	1	278
Iridology	Diagnosis	1.4	68	14	8	7	2	285
Ozon therapy	Cardiovascular disease	0.8	77	16	5	2	0	265
Chelation therapy	Cardiovascular disease	1.8	59	17	16	7	1	281
Enzyme therapy	General	1.3	68	17	10	4	0	277
Cell therapy	General	1.0	75	13	10	1	0	277
Thymus extract	General	0.8	80	12	8	1	0	260

*For separate items the response is lower than 293 out of 395.

in the Netherlands as an alternative therapy for cancer patients. However, only 12% of the GPs believes it to have any efficacy.

Orthomolecular medicine

The same negative opinion is usually expressed for megadoses of calcium, beta-carotene or vitamin C (cancer prevention), vitamin E (atherosclerosis) or combinations of vitamins (general prevention). Vitamin C in megadose is considered efficacious by 20% for common cold, whereas vitamin B6 in cases of the premenstrual syndrome is positively scored by 35%.

Miscellaneous

Many other procedures are generally believed to make no sense. Among the diagnostic procedures less than 10% considers astrology or iridology to be proper medical practice. The same goes for ozon therapy and chelation therapy (cardiovascular disease), and for enzyme therapy, cell therapy or injections with thymus extract.

DISCUSSION

Our study shows that many Dutch GPs believe in the efficacy of common alternative procedures. Of course, it is only a survey of opinions and no conclusions can be drawn about true efficacy.

We are surprised about the high amount of credit that is given to certain (to us) incomprehensible

practices such as acupuncture, homoeopathy and anthroposophy. It must be realized that even low percentages of positive scores represent a good many doctors. Especially if there is a large contrast between belief in and evidence of efficacy, the publication of literature reviews and empirical studies in scientific journals and the lay press makes sense.

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