

Update 63

THE RISE AND RISE OF CAM: A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

It appears as though the use of CAM is growing - each year Australians spend more on CAM products than out of pocket contributions to pharmaceuticals; in the USA there are now more CAM consultations than conventional consultations in primary care while demand for and expenditure on CAM seems to have doubled over the decade of the 90's. (1)

The authors of this paper (2), one (IDC) a former President of a chiropractic college, suggest that it is curious that the growth of CAM is occurring in countries where Western science and scientific method are generally accepted as the major foundations for healthcare. Furthermore, regarding the integration of CAM into conventional medicine, the authors note that, from a sociological perspective, the issue is one of commensurability of paradigms. They suggest that to argue for integrativeness implies that the knowledge bases of the paradigms are commensurable - that is, that they are logically consistent. Through the use of example, however, the authors argue that the paradigms are incommensurable, and that the possibilities for combining treatments based on the two paradigms are limited.

The authors concede that the causes of the rise of CAM remain largely unexplored and unknown. They occupy the rest of their brief commentary with speculative explanations as to the causes of the rise of CAM. What follows is a summary, in point form, of their speculations.

Causes of the rise of CAM:

- Ageing population.
- Growing emphasis on chronic illness and lifestyle-related morbidity.
- Post-modern thesis that suggests that as social change has accelerated, faith in science and technology has declined.
- Social green movements.
- Social trends toward individualism.
- Growth of the consumer movement.
- Increased immigration of models and medicines from other lands.
- Politicisation of health - return of control of health to the individual and control of the health care system to the community.

The authors observe that other specific causes may have contributed to the growth of CAM, and will probably do so in the future. One is the declining competitive advantage of conventional doctors as bulk billing is abandoned and another is that as Internet use grows, patients may be exposed to more useful information about CAM's.

The authors conclude that it is very unlikely that the trend towards CAM will be reversed in the immediate future because it is occurring in the context of broader societal changes which have produced a political climate in which CAM can increasingly challenge medicine and seek its own power.

ASRF Update Editor's comment: Results of the recent globally distributed WFC survey of the chiropractic profession on the issue of identity reveal that **89%** of the chiropractors who responded believed that the profession and its services are currently perceived by the public to be CAM as opposed to mainstream. In contrast **88%** of respondents stated that the profession and its services should be perceived by the public to be mainstream.

Reference:

1. Lewith GT, Bensoussan A. Complementary and Alternative medicine - with a difference. *Med J Aust* 2004; 180:585-86.
2. Coulter ID, Willis EM. The rise and rise of complementary and alternative medicine: a sociological perspective. *Med J Aust* 2004; 180:587-89.