

CONVENTIONAL VS INTEGRATIVE HEALTHCARE: THE IMPACT OF THE DOCTOR-PATIENT RELATIONSHIP ON PATIENT WELLBEING DURING TREATMENT

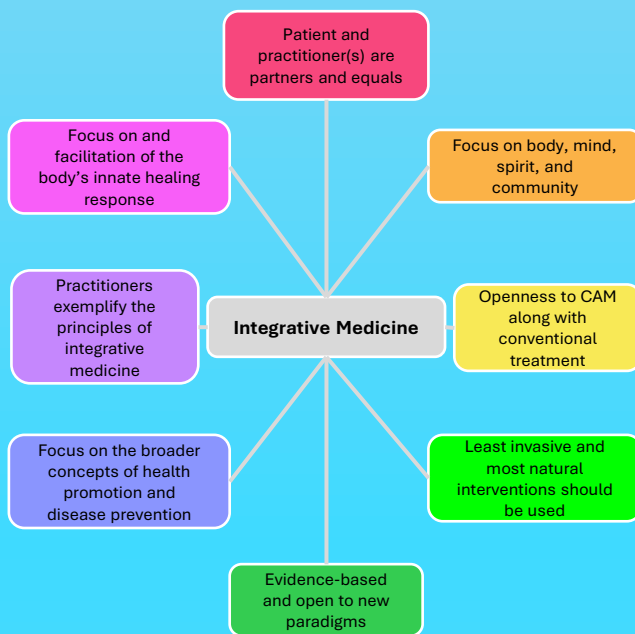


SECOND YEAR SSC, BRISTOL MEDICAL SCHOOL

BACKGROUND

What is integrative medicine?

- Integrative medicine is a way of practising healthcare which combines conventional medical treatments with a holistic, patient-oriented approach
- The ideology of integrative medicine is that the doctor should consider and aim to treat the mind, spirit, and community of the patient as well as their body, and that medicine should be about both reacting to and preventing pathology with equal priority
- The diagram below summarises the defining principles of integrative medicine, all of which are fundamental to the way it is practised (Andrew Weil Centre for Integrative Medicine, 2017)
- A strong doctor-patient relationship is at the core of integrative medicine, and it has a conceptual, fundamental focus on patient wellbeing (Cloninger, 2010)
- Whilst integrative medicine advocates openness to complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) and allowing patients to choose such treatments, it can be practised in an entirely allopathic way and is fundamentally an evidence-based approach
- This poster advocates this evidence-based practice of integrative medicine, and the adoption of its tenets into conventional healthcare



The doctor-patient relationship in integrative vs conventional healthcare

- Conventional healthcare systems refer to mainstream, allopathic, Western institutions- the NHS is an example of a conventional system
- Conventional systems like the NHS do encourage a strong doctor-patient relationship and attention to patient wellbeing during treatment, defined in this project as patient satisfaction and emotional state
- However, whilst these ideals are not precluded in conventional healthcare, they are not necessitated: conventional healthcare can be practised in a way that disregards both
- Hence, in conventional healthcare the priority given to building a strong doctor-patient relationship and maximising patient wellbeing is left to the discretion of individual practitioners
- In contrast, integrative medicine holds both a strong doctor-patient relationship and a focus on patient wellbeing to be core, defining principles (Maizes, et al., 2009)
- Therefore, a practitioner who does *not* prioritise the doctor-patient relationship and patient wellbeing is by definition not properly practising integrative medicine
- Integrative medicine's conceptual focus on the doctor-patient relationship and patient wellbeing has been vindicated by various studies (Kaplan, et al., 1989)
- However, despite the clinical evidence present supporting this focus, conventional healthcare systems have not reconceptualised themselves and prioritised the doctor-patient relationship and patient wellbeing accordingly
- In doing this project, I want to draw attention to this discrepancy and play a small part in encouraging a change in how we practise medicine

The importance of a strong doctor-patient relationship in patient wellbeing

A strong doctor-patient relationship (and by extension high patient wellbeing) constitute both a means and an end: a means as they have been shown to improve clinical outcomes, and an end for moral reasons

Healthcare ultimately seeks to improve patients' happiness (by improving their health) so patient wellbeing during treatment is a self-evident goal which integrative medicine accords the priority that it deserves

The doctor-patient relationship has been shown to affect clinical outcomes in both hospital (Ong, et al., 1995) and psychiatric settings. It can even affect physiological outcomes like blood sugar and pressure (Kaplan, et al., 1989)

It also affects subjective outcomes like patients' perceptions of how their symptoms have improved (Kaptchuk et al., 2008)

Moreover, the link between the doctor-patient relationship and consequent patient wellbeing has been established by research (Williams, et al. 1998)

Finally, there's a financial component: in healthcare, many interventions to improve clinical outcomes are costly, but research has shown that focusing on improving the doctor-patient relationship can improve clinical outcomes in a cost effective way (Sobel, 1995)

In healthcare systems, the strength of the doctor-patient relationship that a practitioner can establish is often limited by structural factors regardless of the medical framework used, e.g. the time that the system allows a practitioner to spend with each patient

However, a stronger doctor-patient relationship yields better clinical outcomes (when all other factors are controlled) than a weaker one. Thus, it is still important for practitioners to try and establish as strong a doctor-patient relationship as circumstances allow

METHOD

- In doing this project, I aimed to investigate evidence-based alternatives to conventional medicine, with integrative medicine being an example. Ultimately, I wanted to see if the West could improve how it practises medicine by exploring alternative frameworks for conceptualising medicine (the integrative framework, summarised on the left, is an example)
- The issue of the doctor-patient relationship and its impact on patient wellbeing is a highly relevant and important one. I chose to do my project about this specific tenet of the integrative framework as it is both very important and can be easily implemented in an evidence-based and cost-effective way
- I hypothesised that the strength of the doctor-patient relationship and its consequent impact on patient wellbeing would be greater in integrative medicine than conventional because the former system puts greater emphasis on it
- To investigate this hypothesis, I interviewed several patients who were receiving treatment from Penny Brohn United Kingdom (PBUK), an integrative medicine provider and registered charity. They had all received conventional treatment beforehand from the NHS, all had cancer diagnoses, and had all accessed several of the services PBUK offered
- I interviewed them about their emotional experiences in both healthcare systems, discussing their relationship with their healthcare practitioners and how this made them feel and affected their wellbeing
- I then did a case study on the experiences of one of these patients. Owing to ethical considerations, I anonymised her, obtained written consent to base my project on her experiences and quotes, and sent her a copy of my project for comments

CASE STUDY AND RESULTS

- Patient XX was diagnosed with low-grade salivary cancer and initially accessed conventional healthcare from the NHS for treatment, receiving a surgical operation to remove her tumour and 5 weeks of radiotherapy
- Due to dissatisfaction with her practitioners and their approach, she sought alternative forms of treatment with a more holistic focus, eventually deciding on integrative healthcare treatment from PBUK
- XX accessed many of their services, taking up 'pretty much everything'. These included multiple 1-to-1 sessions with nutritionists and doctors; attending sessions of stress management, nutrition, and exercise; and receiving and reading information sent from PBUK (for example, their weekly emails to clients)
- XX stated that PBUK 'completely changed my cancer journey. Their support and knowledge has been...transformative', and XX had a stronger doctor-patient relationship in integrative rather than conventional healthcare. Consequently, her wellbeing whilst accessing integrative treatment was comparatively higher
- Below is a list of quotations she gave regarding the doctor-patient relationship and its impact in conventional vs integrative healthcare. The left column pertains to conventional healthcare, and the right pertains to integrative healthcare

XX felt that something was 'amiss'

When she did her own research on the role of supplements in cancer recovery, she received a 'blanket response' from her medical team that felt like 'shutting [me] down'

She found the behaviour of her team to be 'belittling' and 'disempowering'

When she spoke to her oncologist about supplements, she felt it was a 'closed conversation, like he didn't have any interest'

She didn't trust him and felt he came from 'a very medicalised model'

When XX had the same conversation about supplements with an integrative medicine doctor, the doctor generally gave the same advice that XX's conventional medicine oncologist did. However, XX accepted the integrative practitioner's advice because 'I believed in her.'

She believed that the integrative doctor's words were 'coming from a place of wisdom and knowledge'

Simply the feeling of her integrative medicine team 'being there' and 'having an open door' was extremely important to XX and her wellbeing

XX feels that with her integrative team, 'there's never any pressure'

XX felt that 'no query or question feels like it's not going to be met with a real wisdom...that I haven't found elsewhere.'

CONCLUSION & DISCUSSION

- XX clearly had a stronger doctor-patient relationship in integrative healthcare, with the result that her wellbeing was greater
- The diagram below is a conclusion which I have inferred from XX's own quotations, which are summarised above in the red/blue speech bubbles. It is a list of five behavioural factors that led to a strong doctor-patient relationship
- These findings can be generalised; many studies identify the same or similar contributory factors to the doctor-patient relationship (Williams, et al., 1998) (Pinto, et al., 2012) (Davidson, et al., 2017) (Manzoor, et al., 2019)
- Regarding the five listed contributory factors below, XX's experiences showed that integrative practitioners displayed these behaviours to a greater extent, and integrative medicine places greater emphasis on these behaviours than conventional
- Because these factors have been shown to be key in establishing a strong doctor-patient relationship, we can conclude that the doctor-patient relationship (and consequently patient wellbeing) is stronger in integrative as opposed to conventional medicine
- This poster encourages conventional medicine to place greater emphasis on its practitioners displaying these behaviours
- The limitations of this study include the fact that it was a case report of one patient, only one conventional healthcare system being analysed (the NHS), only one integrative system being analysed (PBUK), and a lack of an objective way to measure wellbeing or the strength of the doctor-patient relationship
- These issues could be rectified by surveying multiple people, surveying participants who have experienced conventional systems other than the NHS and integrative systems other than PBUK, and measuring the doctor-patient relationship by standardised questionnaires. Participants who had the same practitioners for their conventional and integrative care could be excluded
- Despite the study's limitations, it has still had a significant personal effect on me, changing the way I want to practise medicine. I am seriously considering a career in integrative medicine, and have gained a much deeper appreciation of the importance of the doctor-patient relationship

1. An open-minded and unbelittling attitude

2. Interest/respect for the patient's findings and decisions

3. Emotional supportiveness and presence

4. Perceived competence and knowledgeability

5. Establishing trust with the patient

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