Personal Health 206

The Alternative Fix

With over a fifth of U.S. hospitals now offering some sort of alternative therapy along with conventional medicine, what are your views on this trend? Are you concerned about the lack of scientific studies proving that alternative medicine actually works? Read the following comments submitted to Frontline by viewers. What opinions do you share? What perspectives do you disagree with? Be prepared to write your own letter to Frontline expressing your view.

**Dear FRONTLINE,**

You presented an interesting picture of the alternative health industry from politics to patient interviews. Something that came to mind was how the science people always spoke of their scientific methods on testing of drugs, but never mentioning two interesting facts:1. Who does the testing? Answer: the drug companies, which is like having the cat babysit the mouse. The test results are then reviewed by the FDA and approved or disapprove. The FDA was never interviewed or brought to account for this bias process. 2. The huge legal liabilities that drug companies face when their drugs cause (Merck is currently in litigation as we speak) incredible side effects, even death and then are sued.

It's unfortunate you didn't bring up the downside of the scientific approach. All one needs do is listen to the ads on TV about the side effects of the drugs being advertised...dizziness, constipation, high blood pressure, drowsiness, headaches, etc., with the caveat of, 'See your physician if any of these symptoms appear.' Or to watch elderly patients walk into a doctor's office with a bag full of prescription drugs that are required to balance the side effects for each other.

I can remember my father living on pills for seven years and having to have a chart to make sure he took the correct pills all day long to manage his heart condition. He finally gave up the whole idea and stopped taking so many drugs. You presented half the picture now do the same for the scientific methods. Thanks for your time,

Tim Swanson  
Mt. Pleasant, Utah

**Dear FRONTLINE,**

While I watched the whole show, I really think you missed the point of what alternative care is all about -- responsibility (while it was hinted at). A responsible person looks at their lifestyle choices and makes changes if his or her health results are not as desired. Personal responsibility is not a popular view for many, or many doctors who preclude treatment by telling people that their actions and lifestyle do not significantly affect their health and risk of disease.

Jeff Gordon  
Greensboro, NC

**Dear FRONTLINE,**

After viewing the Frontline episode, "The Alternative Fix," I was surprised how much respect the alternative medicine promoters were given. These people are either deluded fervent believers far removed from science, or outright charlatans and frauds. Their only skill is the ability to lie with a straight face, and their only education is how to effectively deceive their fellow men for notoriety and personal profit.

In the epilogue, noting the release of the study about the efficacy of acupuncture, failed to include the editor's stern warning. "Many participants dropped out of the study, so readers should interpret the findings at 26 weeks with caution." (<http://www.annals.org/cgi/content/abstract/141/12/901>?hp) At the end of the study, 43% of the participants did not report, making the study extremely short of its statistical quorum and reeks of poor controls.

The onus of proof rests upon the pseudo-sciences, not established sciences, to establish efficacy. This is because it is FAR easier to make an outlandish claim than it is to apply the scientific method. In other words, if you say there's a bear in the woods, prove it; it's not my job to prove that it's not there.

And finally: just because event A happens before event B does not mean that A caused B (as in, "I took the pill, then I got better"). What we're dealing with is far, far more pervasive than simply following rituals and having fun. We have a society that is more and more rejecting simple logic and cause-effect in favor of maintaining previously held beliefs. It's more than hospitals trying to profit on a trend, it's a true anti-science change in our nation's politics and attitudes.

Scott Biggs  
Austin, Texas

**Dear FRONTLINE,**

I am a student studying acupuncture and chinese herbs. I am also an energy healer. As I see it, there need not be a conflict between the various forms of medicine. I would immediately seek western medicine if I were in an accident and needed emergency care. And, I would compliment western care with alternative medicine. After considering what didn't "sit well" with me from the program, I came up with this: The "experts" were western doctors. They cited "science" as their basis for why western medicine works, while alternative therapies probably do not. But science includes physics - which is proving that there IS a mind, body connection. The mind/body/spirit connection is what Five Element Acupuncture, and most alternative medicine is based upon.

Thank you,

Hilary Laferriere  
Hollywood, FL

**Dear FRONTLINE,**

I think the one thing that surprised me was how shocked Dr's were to discover, after a study, how prevalent the use of alternative medicines was. Apparently the study was done in 1991, I believe. Good grief! Supplements and alternative therapies have been available for many many years now. I remember seeing a movie about acupuncture in 1972! I had acupuncture treatments thru the Bill Pone Clinic in San Francisco in the 70's. I’ve been taking supplements and herbal medicines since the early 70's and they have been widely available since then. How Dr's didn’t know about their widespread use is just incredulous to me!

I think that Dr's (not all, but many) have a basic contempt for the people they treat. They don’t believe us when we are in pain, they spend 2 minutes with us and come up with a diagnosis and hand out pills. I once had a sharp pain in my knee for about 2 weeks and I went to the major hospital in Seattle. I walk in, and without him doing an examination he told me I had a condition that would require several weeks physical therapy. He didn’t even look at my knee. He just told me to walk across the room. I was wearing a long winter coat, long pants and knee high boots on. What was he? Superman with x-ray vision? I looked at him incredulously and never went back. That was 10 years ago and my knee was just fine.

I have many stories like this. Doctors have enjoyed a certain power status for many years. Alternative therapy puts the responsibility of care in the patient’s domain and dr's are just angry with that. One of the Dr's in your program, Marcia Angell, says that people are just "reporting" that these therapies work. They just "report" that they feel better. That there is no scientific evidence this is true. Huh? Listen to that. I guess patients are too stupid or ill informed to know if they have pain, if they feel better. I don’t think this was one of your better programs, and I am a big fan of Frontline. This is just too big of a subject to put in one show. I’d like to see a second show, though!

Pamela Brooke  
Portland, OR

**Dear FRONTLINE,**

I watched your special report on alternative medicine and found it to biased. I am a 45 year old healthy educator. I come from a family of poor uneducated parents who resorted to alternative medicine probably because we could not afford medical care.

My father regularly chews Yellow root, and uses copper pennies for arthritis. I can't wait to speak with him today about other old fashion remedies that I may not have been exposed to. He is 82 years old and in pretty good health. As a child I was treated with sardine juice for mumps, turpentine and sugar for tapeworms. What's in these pharmaceutical drugs anyway? Are they synthetic or made from nature.

Please look into doing a documentary where alternative medicine and prescription drugs are looked at equally. The consumer should have a feeling of fairness because most Americans at one time are another has used some kind of "alternative medicine". Please allow the consumer to self-diagnose. Who knows their body better than the person that lives in that body?

I believe that miscommunication between doctor and patient happen more often than not. Furthermore if something fatal happens while using alternative medicine, the liabilty can be placed on the consumer. Doctors are going out of business these days because of malpractice lawsuits. I think that putting pressure on the natural medicine industry may put dollars in someone’s pocket definitely not the consumer.

Janice Martin  
Griffin, Georgia

**Dear FRONTLINE,**

For a program that was supposed to help educate the public regarding a most important issue, The Alternative Fix was a horrible disservice for those seeking substantive health information. The evidence for scientifically validated alternatives that have been shown to heal many dreadful conditions in numerous patients, was hardly mentioned. The flagrant errors of omission and commission made your presentation nothing other than a travesty. Your program was surely not responsible journalism; it was junk reporting by those unprepared for the task. This is a complex issue that required an in depth study of all facets of the topic for a significant period of time rather than just long enough to meet a programming deadline.

There are tens of thousands, perhaps even millions of people leading happy, pain free, productive lives for twenty or more years, even after being given only a few months to live by a conventionally trained doctor who had virtually no training in the biological sciences and surely not in nutritional science with its ongoing research into stunningly advanced products that heal on a cellular level. Why were there not any interviews with these folks who could have added substance, hope and truth to the program? Instead you showed those who were unsuccessful or who died after alternative treatment, leaving the viewer with the distinct impression that alternatives are ineffective. The medical stories that you chose to discuss were not representative of a much larger group who have had successes. This was much more than insensitive: it was a cruel hoax masquerading as objective reporting.

Your program criticized the supplement industry, suggesting that it was primarily driven by earnings. This is surely the case in a number of instances but by implication it paints all supplement producers with the same dirty brush. This is shameful; there are many producers who dedicate themselves to standards of ethical research and excellent quality of product that put the pharmaceutical industry to shame. As the nauseating inundation of drug advertising in all the media will attest, Big Pharma is also intent on constantly growing the bottom line. Recent headlines dealing with potentially dangerous drugs made by giant pharmaceutical firms are only the tip of the iceberg and they all surpass in severity any of the relatively few problems with supplements. Again, there was no balance of presentation in your program.

There are truly remarkably skilled doctors who cure using their knowledge of natural healing, nutrition, chiropractic and other modalities. Those are the healers that should have been featured in the program. They are well known and a modicum of investigation would have revealed them to anyone intent on a fair program. Your suggestion that a real study of the effectiveness of alternative treatments has been achieved is simply bogus. Your entire program was bogus and missed an extraordinary opportunity to guide those who are searching for truthful answers to serious health problems.

Sherwin Berger  
Phoenix, AZ

**Dear FRONTLINE,**

I watched with both interest and dismay your report on alternative treatments. It is virtually impossible to do justice to a topic of such complexity in an hour. As a scientist, I am painfully aware of the extreme ignorance of the vast majority of people on the basic concepts of the scientific method. The complexity of study design, control selection, uncontrolled variables, statistical methods and the limits of conclusions derived from the data.

There is little understanding of the concept of correlation versus causality. The "post hoc, ergo propter hoc" logic error is a very common cause of misinterpretation. Anecdotal evidence is used as proof of something when it is in fact rather useless information.

There is an unfortunate trend in the medical profession that has emerged from economic constraints imposed by the existing health insurance system. Patients spend little time if any with their doctors. The use of physician extenders has made the doctor-patient relationship non-existent in this assembly line system. It is no surprise that patients are seeking alternative methods. They have questions, personal matters and non medical problems that need to be heard.

To add to the problem is the revenue driven powerful influence of the drug manufacturing group in funding and allowing research that is not in their best interest. Good research is costly and institutions must survive. The price is a loss of intellectual integrity and slanted goals. There are many more factors. Humans look for hope, regardless of the source. That human quality has caused profound changes in our history, and will continue to do so regardless of the facts. It was still an excellent report.

Jorge Ramos-Lorenzi PE MD.  
Port Kent, New York

**Dear FRONTLINE,**

I find that most MD's; that I have been to; are not interested in anything more than prescribing a prescription drug to heal whatever ails you. They spend 10 minutes with you and if you foolishly tell them you have a problem, they immediately pull out the prescription pad and write up a prescription.

Both my husband and I have had very bad reactions to some drugs and these doctors can't understand why we are very leery of taking them. Hello! We both religiously keep our monthly appointments with our chiropractors, take our supplements, watch our diets and try to stay away from taking prescription medicines unless absolutely necessary. We would not be so foolish as to ignore an infection or other serious ailment. All statins are poison for my husband. Terrible reactions: skin eruptions, extreme fatigue and muscle pain and with Tricor, swollen face and the question of "can you breath, can you swallow?".

Celebrex gave me an allergic reaction in 4 hours. My husband is 67 and a heart bypass patient and I am 65. The only meds my husband takes is for pre-glaucoma, high pressure in his eyes. We have chiropractic adjustments to keep us in shape and moving well and acupuncture for high blood pressure also, erchonia laser for the high blood pressure, GERD, asthma, etc. I am receiving treatment for my knee, which has helped tremendously. The MD just gave me Celebrex for the pain. My chiropractor has done more for my general health than anyone.

I think your program was slanted very much against alternative treatments. We have more respect for our chiropractors than our MD's. They listen to us and have successfully helped us very much. The problem with MD's is that they are wined and dined by the drug companies and urged to push meds on us. We will not take any drugs that have not been on the market for at least 5 years unless we should have a life or death condition that could only be treated by these. We refuse to be the drug company's guinea pigs.

Joyce McGilvery

**Dear FRONTLINE,**

I have practiced western medicine as a mastered prepared nurse practitioner and have found through direct experience that so called alternative treatments often do work. One must recognize that many of these modalities have been used for over 2,000 years, (Ayurveda & Chinese medicine.) There has also been a wealth of scientific studies done & published in peer reviewed journals.

One point that you failed to make was the financial impact upon western practitioners as recognized by the AMA. They spend large amounts of money to protect their interests, despite the studies that show a complimentary approach to be the most efficacious. No one modality is the best for every malady, injury or disease. Wisdom would indicate that to achieve true healing, one must be open to a variety of approaches, as well as to the patients cultural, spiritual and personal beliefs & needs.

With respect to the drug / herbal safety issue, how did the FDA allow Viox to be sold when it clearly had major side effects & yet other Cox-2 inhibitors are still allowed to be dispensed. Yes, when a supplement such as ephedra is used improperly & for the wrong indications harm can result. In these situations, it should be removed and dispensed only by a licensed practitioner, but there is room & reason for all modalities to be used in the proper circumstances & for the conditions indicated by those respective practitioners. Personally, we have had experience with treatment for chronic bursitis by a western allopathic physician for 1/1/2 - 2 years without relief or improvement, but 90% relief and improvement with acupuncture after two treatments which has persisted for over 6 months. Another experience of lifelong allergies to cats went unimproved after years of steroid therapy, but with one dose of a homeopathic remedy, total relief was achieved.

Homeopathy works through the energy of the remedy, not the amount of drug, herb or whatever the remedy was produced from. You see, homeopathy is based upon the belief that all things have energy and that energy is transferred into the fluid in which it is dissolved. The water or tablet infused with the diluted liquid is imbued with that energy and it is that energy of a substance which imitates or replicates the symptoms experienced by the patient that relieves the malady. Homeopathy works by treating with a remedy that creates similar symptoms, in those well individuals on whom it was tested, to those symptoms that the patient has experienced. It is the energy of that substance that heals, not the actual substance itself. For those who doubt the energy hypothesis, think of how ultrasound treatment for kidney stones, or the energy of radiation treatments, the energy of the sun which is the basis for all life on earth and the energy that produces all food on earth. Certainly, there also is a place for spiritual healing as written about by Dr. Larry Dossey. Thank you,

Rev. Marc H. Kalmanson, MSN,ARNP, C.Ht.,LMT,RYT, O.M.

Marc Kalmanson  
Keystone Heights, FL

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Personal Health 206

The Alternative Fix

Your turn…..After reading all the comments posted about the contents of Frontline’s *The Alternative Fix,* write your own opinion. Was the program biased? Why or why not? Do you think CAM should be included in treatment plans? Why or why not? Would you personally use CAM treatments? Why or why not?

**Dear FRONTLINE,**