

Consumer Literature on Alternative Medicine: Addressing Consumer Confusion

Laurel Skurko

Consumer futurist Faith Popcorn in her 1991 book, *The Popcorn Report*, describes a trend of "Staying Alive," which predicts that Americans will continue in the direction of seeking self-healing and self-care. According to Popcorn, "Medical knowledge and alternatives will cross cultures in a way we have never seen before...[moving] to the mainstream of medicine, ... [being] incorporated into traditional treatments, or stand[ing] on their own as preferred courses of action." (Popcorn, 1991)

Over the past 25 years, *The American Journal of Chinese Medicine* has witnessed and participated in the dramatic rise in the use of alternative medicine in the U.S. The Jpirma look forward to helping this movement attain the next level, providing the communication needed to increase understanding and acceptance among medical practitioners and researchers, and to instigate increased education of consumers. It is such communication that will enable the true integration of alternative medicine into the daily lives of health practitioners, and, ultimately, consumers.

In order for the alternative medicine community to realize the "future" of alternative medicine, as Faith Popcorn and others so optimistically foresee it, we must start by taking stock of this industry, where it has been, where it is today, and where it is going. Borrowing a technique used from the consumer products industry, we might start by creating a kind of industry map from a consumer perspective. To do this, we must first understand:

- The continued growth potential for alternative medicine in the U.S.
- How consumers perceive alternative medicine today
- Factors influencing these perceptions
- Means of addressing their major concerns in adapting alternative medicine

Let us examine each factor in turn.

The Continued Growth Potential for Alternative Medicine in the U.S.

Advocates of alternative medicine can celebrate the fact that 34% of the U.S. population uses some form of alternative medicine, and that interest and demand continue to climb (Eissenberg *et al.*, 1993)

In the U.S., this \$50 billion dollar alternative medicine industry continues to strive for further growth (*The New York Times*, 1996):

- Over 50% of the top 250 pharmaceutical companies are currently conducting research to develop new active materials from plants (Cosmetics-and-Toiletries, 1994)
- Retailers such as Thrifty PayLess have worked to capitalize on trends in alternative medicine by devoting more space to herbal remedies and homeopathic products (Chain-Drug-Review, 1994)
- From 1992-1993, the number of HMOs offering chiropractic coverage rose to almost 50% from about 25%, according to the Group Health Association of America. (Caraton, 1995)
- Over 50% of conventional physicians use or refer patients for complementary and alternative medical treatments in the U.S. (Office of Alternative Medicine, 1996)

Despite these benchmarks, the potential for growth is still great. Indeed, according to the World Health Organization, 65-80% of the world's population relies on traditional medicine as its primary form of medicine (Complementary Alternative Medicine at the NIH, 1997). The U.S. still has a long way to go in realizing the value associated with the increased use of alternative medicine.

How Consumers Perceive Alternative Medicine Today

While interest is strong, consumers have not responded fully to the vast array of products and services currently on the market. This puzzle was aptly captured in a feature article in *Time Magazine* on the topic in May, 1997: "No matter how many times consumers have been shown this shopping list of cures before...only a comparatively small percentage of them have expressed any interest." (Kluger, 1997).

Why is "supply" greater than "demand?" Why do consumers flock to alternative health gurus such as Deepak Chopra, but otherwise hesitate before the growing herbal medicine selection at their local retailer?

The answer may very well lie in "packaging." Spokespeople like Andrew Weil, M.D., author of two recent best-sellers on alternative medicine and a TV personality, are successful in large part because they provide consumers with a way of organizing the vast amount of new information available to them on alternative medicine. The consumers are often confused and even intimidated, and need a helping hand to increase their understanding, change their attitudes, and, finally adapt alternative medicine into their daily lives.

CONSUMER LITERATURE ON ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE

Factors Influencing Consumer Perceptions

Today, by reviewing the body of literature from authors like Weil, we can see where many consumers and their practitioners stand in terms of their own understanding of this topic. We can also see what is needed to help fill in the gaps in their perceptions.

By reviewing literature currently available on alternative medicine in book stores - either consumer- (i.e. the national chain, Barnes & Noble), medical - (i.e. Stanford Medical School Book Store), alternative healing (i.e. Bodhi Tree Book Store in Los Angeles), or the Internet (i.e. Amazon.com), we found that consumer literature on alternative medicine can be divided into approximately three categories: (1) the changing health care paradigm; (2) healers and their methods; and (3) encyclopedias covering the range of therapies available.

1. The Changing Health Care Paradigm: Drive Toward "Self-care"

In her book, *Market Driven Health Care: Who Wins, Who Loses in the Transformation of America's Largest Service Industry* (Herzlinger, 1997), Regina Herzlinger, of Harvard Business School, describes a consumer who is increasingly driven toward seeking self-care. They want what she calls "convenience and mastery". She gives examples from the healthcare industry today, such as the view of an advertising executive who notes: "What you're really seeing is a real sea of change in the way people interact with the marketplace. You've got a much smarter, much more seasoned consumer. These are people who go to a [provider] and say, 'Together let's figure out how I can do this myself.'" Indeed, a 1987 report of the American Board of Family Practice, shows that 39% of Americans surveyed described themselves as "working at staying healthy". Further evidence is seen in the rise of how-to-take-care-of-yourself magazines aimed at this "activist" consumer segment, such as *Psychology Today*, *American Health*, and *Prevention*, among others. This drive for self-care is fueling the demand for alternative techniques, many of which transfer control to the user (Herzlinger, 1997).

Other books providing evidence of consumer dissatisfaction with the health care system and their search for more personal responsibility for their health include, *InfoMedicine* by Baldwin & McInerney (1996) and *Manifesto for a New Medicine* by James S. Gordon (1996), first chairman of the Advisory Council of the Office of Alternative Medicine, as well as *Women's Bodies, Women's Minds* by Christine Northrup (1995).

2. The Healers and Their Methods

Andrew Weil, Deepak Chopra, and others are best-selling authors who are becoming the self-healer spokespersons of America. They offer clear explanations of their methods, centers that people can associate with "alternative care," and an answer to consumers' insatiable desire for "new-and-improved" or "different." For example, in his recent book, *Eight Weeks to Optimum Health* (1997, Knopf), Andrew Weil, M.D. takes a consumer step-by-step through experimentations with different aspects of alternative medicine that are available but still puzzling to the consumer. Week-by-week, he touches on new experiments in

diet, supplements, exercise, and spirituality. The reader progresses from taking vitamins and eating fresh broccoli in week-one to taking various tonics, and conducting Relaxing Breath exercises twice a day by the end of the program (Weil, 1997).

Dr. Weil, while criticized by many of his peers in the medical community for the lack of scientific validity of his work, demonstrates clear marketing talent in making the “product” of alternative medicine approachable by the end-user.

3. *Encyclopedias of Alternative Medicine*

While the Office for Alternative Medicine (OAM) lists seven broad categories of complementary and alternative medical practices, they also recognize 12 conceptually independent health care systems developed worldwide, falling into at least 27 major categories of practice, which involve over 200 methods. They divide their list yet another way into “major health care systems,” such as Ayurveda and Traditional Chinese Medicine, and “modern systems,” including chiropractic and homeopathy. The OAM continues to refine its classification of the systems of alternative medicine (Office of Alternative Medicine Clearing House, 1997).

Helping consumers and professionals alike classify our options is a popular topic in the literature. *Alternative Medicine: The Definitive Guide* (1995), provides a 1000-page volume, segmenting by both 43 types of therapies, as well as by health conditions to be treated. Similarly, Time Life, in its *The Alternative Advisor* (1997), offers explanations of 24 different alternative treatments. In *Dr. Rosenfeld's Guide to Alternative Medicine*, Isadore Rosenfeld (1996) provides the current medical justification of 26 alternative therapies. *It Works For Me: Celebrity Stories of Alternative Health* by Heidi Banks (1996) lets celebrities offer their personal case histories, with 18 different therapies.

There are more than 100 reported varieties of massage techniques alone. How can the consumer decide which one to use? In the encyclopedia-genre of literature, we spotted anywhere from 18 to 43 types of therapies from which the consumer could choose, not including the different methods used within each of those categories. While various encyclopedia-type works attempt to help organize information for the consumer, one may often be left wondering how to steer methodically toward *the* most suitable therapy.

Means of Addressing Consumer Concerns in Adapting Alternative Medicine

Why is there still a disproportionately small percentage of consumers able to access the proliferating options available to them in alternative medicine?

Examining the body of consumer literature may provide part of the answer. There appears to be lack of a unified message. While most books are consistent in providing a positive view of the genre of alternative medicine, there is still a great deal of diversity regarding “What is alternative medicine?” On the one hand, encyclopedias like *The Alternative Medicine Advisor* provide a detailed list of methodologies that risk confusing the uninitiated. On the other hand, individual healer-spokespeople risk promoting a single methodology as superior to other systems or methods of practice.

In order to insure effective growth of the alternative medicine industry in the U.S.,

CONSUMER LITERATURE ON ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE

the consumer needs to gain more confidence with an increasing knowledge of the genre itself. Consumers require a clear contextual framework to understand this new world of options available to them.

The AJCM look forward to continuing to add to this body of knowledge, and to otherwise participating in further efforts at clarifying and implementing alternative medicine.

References

1. Baldwin, Fred. D. and Suzanne McInerney. *Infomedicine: A Consumer's Guide to the Latest Medical Research*. Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1996.
2. Banks, Heidi. *It Works for me! Celebrity Stories of Alternative Healing*. Boston: Journey Editions, 1996.
3. Caraton, Barbara. Insurance: Health Insurers Embrace Eye-of-New-Therapy. *The Wall Street Journal*, January 30, 1995, Section B, p.1.
4. Chain-Drug-Review, "Thrifty PayLess Capitalizes on Trends in Health Care," December 5, 1994.
5. Complementary Alternative Medicine at the NIH, Volume IV, Number 1, OAM, NIH, January, 1997.
6. Cosmetics-and-Toiletries, "Biologically Active Compounds: Detection and Isolation from Plant Material of the World's over 250,000 Species of Flowers Plants," June, 1994.
7. Eisenberg, David M., Ronald C. Kessler, Cindy Foster, Frances E. Norlock, David R. Calkins and Thomas L. Delbanco. Unconventional medicine in the United States: Prevalence, costs, and patterns of use, *The New England Journal of Medicine*, 328:246-252, 1993.
8. Gordon, James S. *Manifesto for a New Medicine: Your Guide to Healing Partnerships and the Wise Use of Alternative Therapies*. Reading: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1996.
9. Herzlinger, Regina. *Market Driven Health Care: Who Wins, Who Loses in the Transformation of America's Largest Service Industry*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc., 1997.
10. Jonas, Wayne B. Office of Alternative Medicine, General Overview. OMA, NIH, February, 1996.
11. Kluger, Jeffrey. "Mr. Natural." *Time*, May 12, 1997, pp. 68-74.
12. Northrup, Christine. *Women's Bodies, Women's Wisdom: Creating Physical and Emotional Health and Healing*. New York: Bantam Books, 1995.
13. Office of Alternative Medicine Clearing House, Office of Alternative Medicine, National Institutes of Health, General Information Package, March, 1997.
14. Popcorn, Faith. *The Popcorn Report*, New York: Harper Business, 1991.
15. Rosenfeld, Isadore. *Dr. Rosenfeld's Guide to Alternative Medicine: What Works, What Doesn't and What's Right for You*. New York: Random House, 1996.
16. *The Alternative Medicine Advisor. The Complete Guide to Natural and Alternative Therapies*. Richmond: Time Life Books, 1997.
17. The Burton Goldberg Group. *Alternative Medicine: The Definitive Guide*. Fife, Washington: Future Medicine Publishing, 1995.
18. *The New York Times*, "Now in the HMO: Yoga teachers & naturopaths." November 24, 1996, pp. 3-11.
19. Weil, Andrew. *Eight Weeks to Optimum Health: A Proven Program for Taking Full Advantage of Your Body's Natural Healing Power*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997.

Erratum

The following figure should have been on Vol. 25, No. 3-4, p. 321, 1997

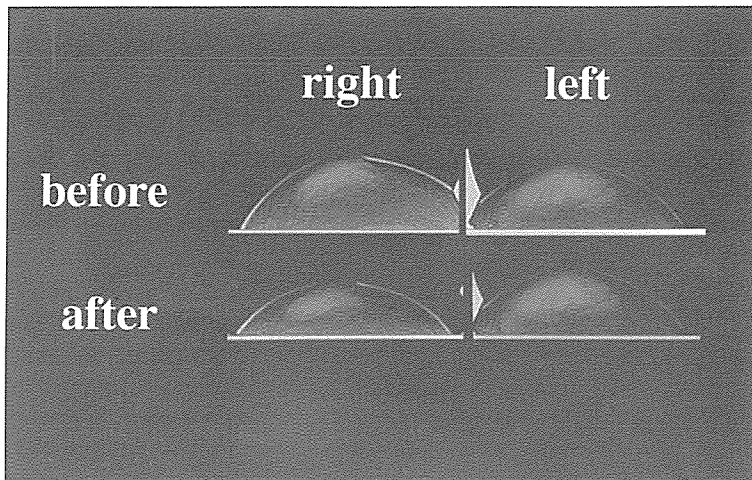


Figure 1. Mammography of case 3. The left mammary gland tissue is enlarged, compared to the right mammary glands, which are also larger than normal tissues. These enlarged mammary glands did not decrease in size after the administration of TJ-1, but the pain, tenderness, and induration of the gynecomastia disappeared.