Enhancing the Doctor-Patient Relationship

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Over the past three decades, the use of healing modalities outside the realm of western allopathic medicine has increased dramatically. An estimated 30% to 40% of Americans use some form of complementary or alternative medicine. This use results in over $30 billion in out-of-pocket expenditures yearly. The term “integrative medicine” has recently evolved to emphasize that synergy may exist between allopathic practices and nontraditional medicine that has the potential to enhance patient care.

But why did patients look to alternatives to western medicine in the first place? There are likely a multitude of reasons. Remarkable advances in allopathic medicine over the last century have saved and extended numerous lives. Yet, many patients are afflicted by ailments for which there are limited options. To search for alternatives would be an anticipated response. In addition, we suffer from a dearth of medications designed for disease prevention. Complementary and integrative medicine may offer patients a potentially natural choice (whether proven or unproven) that allows them to try to take control of their own health.

Despite the high prevalence of complementary and integrative medicine use, most patients do not disclose such use to their providers. This may be due to the fact that patients feel that their physicians would not understand or that their physician would look down upon them. The truth is that most forms of integrative therapies are not taught in any depth in medical school, resulting in a knowledge gap for most providers. In this issue, Dr Saper has brought together experts from numerous specialties to help fill some of that gap. The goal for most providers will not be to blindly adopt all complementary and integrative therapies, but to be able to engage their patients in
meaningful discussions of the risks and benefits of any modality. Such engagement will likely strengthen the provider-patient relationship.

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