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# Complementary and alternative medicine

## More than just needles and nerves

ANA COTHAM

On one hand, the field of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM)—sometimes called integrative medicine—has experienced a comparatively recent upswing in public exposure and scientific acceptance among current medical practices. On the other hand, treatments deemed ‘alternative’ often date back thousands of years to a number of ancient cultures. “The belief of traditional Chinese and Eastern medicine, and part of the naturopath philosophy, is that the body has the innate ability to heal itself,” says **DR. CHRIS HENDERSON**, founder and director of Optimal Health Center in Calistoga, who also works as an acupuncturist supporting the various departments at Synergy Medical Fitness Center, part of Queen of the Valley Medical Center in Napa. “But things get in our way: trauma, poor nutrition, etc. What are symptoms but the body’s warning sign that something is going on?”



The field has recently had two major advancements, one of which was the creation of the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) in 1998, a division of the National Institutes of Health that to research CAM therapies. “That was a big milestone,” Henderson says. Over the years, more evidence-based research has emerged in support of these therapies, encouraging some of the more mainstream medical establishments—such as Synergy, the inclusion of acupuncture in Kaiser Permanente’s medical services, or rehabilitation services for cardiovascular or diabetic conditions—to consider them for their own facilities.

The second advancement was the creation of a Naturopathic Doctor (N.D.) license in several states, including California (see sidebar.) Licensure “has opened up the ability of naturopaths to serve the community more,” Henderson says, who treats conditions ranging from pain management and hormone and thyroid issues, to sciatica, kids with colds and people who want cancer support. “Our tool bag is broader. Having a strong foundation in both Western medicine and natural integrative medicine allows me to look at both sides of the fence. Patients can run into a dead end with the same old tests with conventional physicians. Having other information that can improve their health is important to them.”

“The [N.D.’s] understanding of the human body is equivalent to a medical doctor’s,” says **DR. MARCO VESPIGNANI** of the Institute for Restorative Health in Davis. “The difference is in the approach. We spend 30 to 40 minutes in the first visit just talking: Where do you live, what do you eat, tell me about your typical day. Then it’s a physical exam, with the objective to back up what the patient is telling me.”



The conventional approach to treat his patient with Crohn’s disease, for example, would be to remove the diseased tissue—i.e., cut out the intestine—and then suppress the immune system with medication. “A more naturopathic approach would be to reduce inflammation with non-pharmaceutical measures and remove foods

or other triggers of the inflammation.”

### IF YOU'RE LOOKING FOR AN N.D.

Anyone can call himself and practice as a “naturopath”, and they may well have plenty of training and experience—or not. However, California doesn’t allow a practitioner to call himself a naturopathic doctor, or N.D., if he’s not licensed. California is one of 16 states, plus the District of Columbia, that licenses N.D.s.

An N.D. has graduated from one of the four accredited naturopathic colleges in the country and, in California, passed two board exams. Licenses can be verified with the Bureau of Naturopathic Medicine ([naturopathic.ca.gov](http://naturopathic.ca.gov).) As with any doctor, verify that they have experience with the health issue of interest, if they have additional training in cancer support, women’s health, etc.

PHOTOS: SCOTT SULLIVAN

### Chelation therapy

The chemical process treats heavy metal poisoning, such as lead poisoning, by binding the molecules and ridding excess metals from the body. One of Henderson’s patients was a painter who used lead-based paints for 40 years; another was a Calistoga resident who drew from his heavily volcanic well water for years. Taking it one step further, “There’s a certain amount of research that implicates heavy metal, like lead, in cardiovascular diseases,” Henderson says. Though not yet approved by the FDA for treatment of cardiovascular disease, it has been long recommended for such by physicians both conventional and

Now that therapies such as acupuncture and biofeedback training are mainstream, what else is on the horizon?

### Nutritional interventions

Nutrition is one of the biggest fields these days, Vespignani says; supplements have found homes in high-end competitive arenas like football or cycling. “The more research that is done by clinics, universities and private industry, the more we’ll see as consumers.” Intravenous or injectable vitamin drips are also useful for people who may have difficulty absorbing nutrients through food due to health conditions such as fibromyalgia or gastrointestinal issues.

### Mind-body medicine

A field also experiencing growth, Vespignani says it’s about “learning to tap the strength and versatility of the human mind [which] will lead to less reliance on medications for pain or cognitive issues and depression.”

### Longevity, or anti-aging, medicine

“People are living longer and want to feel their best for as long as possible,” Vespignani says. “Medicine often disregards many symptoms as just part of ‘aging’ and patients are no longer willing to accept that.” Some anti-aging therapies, such as facial acupuncture, serve the dual purpose of providing both aesthetic benefits in helping one look younger, and physiological benefits, as in how the meridians on the face affect the rest of the body and its functions. “It’s similar to eating healthfully and taking your vitamins,” Henderson says. “It’ll have a physiological effect, but it also affects your skin via proper blood flow and nutrients.”

### Detoxification therapy

People are more concerned about chemical toxins in food, water and air. Vespignani has seen more patients for therapy and education about how to reduce toxic intake as well as our toxic footprints. “For me,” he adds, “it is important that consumers become more aware of the entire lifecycle of the products that they buy.”

integrative, and there is a current NCCAM trial underway. (Read more at [nccam.nih.gov](http://nccam.nih.gov).)



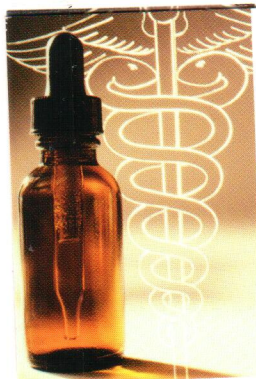
### **Bioidentical hormone replacement therapy**

BHRT has had big exposure thanks to celebrity advocates like Oprah Winfrey and Suzanne Somers. “BHRT is about restoring hormone balances back to healthy physiological levels, the levels when you were younger,” says **LORELEE SCIPIONE**, a physician assistant with Regenerative Health Associates in Vacaville, which began offering BHRT when **DR. BRIAN KLINK**, who is certified through the American Academy of Anti-Aging Medicine, opened the offices in 2008. “Bioidentical hormones have the same molecular structure as hormones made in the human body, hence the term. Our patients have their levels evaluated, and treatment is customized based on their own personal results.” IRH and Optimal Health Center have also been fielding increasing requests for BHRT. “It’s on the rise, mostly because of female empowerment and [celebrity] attention to the subject,” explains Vespignani. “Many women want to feel as feminine as they can for as long as they can and BHRT often provides that avenue for them. Thankfully, every month there are more studies showing the safety of these therapies when used appropriately.” (In 2008, the FDA ruled “bioidentical” to be a marketing term; the treatment is not currently FDA-approved.)



### **Apitherapy**

The use of honeybee products for medical purposes dates back hundreds of years. But Henderson discovered increasing research and anecdotal evidence showing its effectiveness, particularly for burn victims and rheumatic and inflammatory conditions, after a workshop with the American Apitherapy Society when a patient with multiple sclerosis had questions about the treatment. “These age-old remedies continue to come back to us in different ways,” he says.\*



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