

Choosing An Alternative Practitioner

By Tonia Jurbin

I recently attended a lecture delivered by Ms. Gina Dingwell, the Director of Services and Education at the Tzu Chi Institute for Complementary and Alternative Medicine. The Tzu Chi Institute is dedicated to researching what is safe, and what is effective in alternative forms of medicine. When they open in January, they will have a staff of 8 traditionally trained physicians with expanded knowledge in complementary medicine, as well as a Client Resource Centre committed to maintaining the most up-to-date collection of information and research on complementary and alternative medicine.

The focus of Ms. Dingwell's lecture was on becoming a good consumer of alternative or complementary medical services; however many of the principles apply to finding any health professional.

Some people turn to alternative medicine because they have exhausted all of the resources of traditional medicine and as a result they are open to anything which may alleviate their suffering. Others may be people who want a holistic approach to health care and natural forms of healing.

In Vancouver, Dingwell stated, about 70% of patients being treated for a specific ailment seek alternative forms of medical treatment, in Canada that figure is 42%. About 46% are female, 39% male, and 49% are affluent baby boomers. The ailments people typically seek help for are; musculoskeletal(38%), emotional (11%), gynecological (7%), digestive complaints (5%), and headaches (5%).

As many forms of alternative medicine are now considered or almost considered mainstream (Chiropractic Medicine, Massage Therapy, Acupuncture, Naturopathic Medicine, Aromatherapy, Reflexology, Anti-Oxidizing Agents and Alexander Technique), people are looking for well trained practitioners and relevant, reliable information more than ever. Some health insurers now cover fees for some of these services.

It takes time to find a practitioner you trust, someone you can work with to solve your particular ailment. When searching for an alternative practitioner it is important to be discriminating. Most alternative practitioners are not regulated.

- Get recommendations, particularly if you have become involved in a self help group that offers support for your particular ailment.

- Contact consumer groups associated with your illness.

- Professional associations and licensing bodies cannot endorse people but can give you names of practitioners.

- Directories and brochures that pro-

vide names and categories are a good start, but should be considered just that, a start.

- Attend a lecture or presentation, is this person is delivering pertinent information or are they self promoting.

- Read any information or articles a practitioner may have published.

- Find out who they practice with and something about their training, did they take a weekend course or is there a solid background?

- Find out if their profession is regulated.

Once you have chosen a practitioner, make an appointment to 'interview' this person. When you make your appointment ensure that the receptionist understands the nature of your visit so that adequate time is booked. Keep the following in mind:

- Bring your medical history with you (be succinct), explain your symptoms, what your physician has tried and what the results were. Is this person willing to contact your physician? If the practitioner is not interested in hearing what you have tried continue your search.

- Are the proposed tests fully explained? You should be told why these tests are necessary, what the results mean, and how much they will cost.

- They should tell you how many visits you will need before you see some improvement in your condition.

- Are they denigrating other health professionals?

Once you have begun treatment with your new practitioner, remain vigilant for the following: claims of miracle cures, immodesty, intimidation, sexism, crossing your physical boundaries, coercion regarding a treatment or therapy, promotion of expensive therapies, your symptoms have not improved (or are worse) after a 3 to 6 month period, or you are not being educated on risks or side effects associated with your treatment. Is this practitioner hiding behind jargon?

- Are they promoting products that must be purchased from them?

- Are they doing more talking or more listening?

- Are you being lectured? Are your health problems your fault? "These problems that took 20 years to develop will take a long, long time correct".

As more is learned about complementary medicine by our traditionally trained physicians, it will gain in popularity and acceptance. In the future these practitioners may become regulated and their services covered by our health insurers. The Tzu Chi Institute will be a welcome addition to Vancouver's fine collection of diversely skilled health professionals.

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