

Integration and Prevention: Natural Partners

Despite the great scientific advances that have propelled medicine forward over the course of the 20th century, important limitations persist at the brink of the 21st. Some conditions, like AIDS, are simply not yet curable.

Despite proliferating antibiotics, resistant pathogens ("germs") are an ever-increasing threat. And there are many conditions for which modern medical care is notoriously ineffective. Chronic low back pain often responds poorly. Painful conditions of the bladder (interstitial cystitis) and the genitalia (vulvodynia) are poorly understood, and often inadequately controlled. Fibromyalgia, premenstrual syndrome, chronic fatigue and irritable bowel syndrome are just a few examples of the many syndromes of symptoms both difficult to explain, and equally difficult to control. Even when the nature of both disease and treatment are well understood, treatment will invariably carry with it some risks. All drugs can produce adverse reactions, no matter how safe they are in general. All tests and procedures similarly carry some risk. As a result, many people opt for "alternative" medicine, or at least try to manage their health mostly with products of nature, rather than science. And for many conditions, natural treatments may be perfectly appropriate, and at times superior to modern medicines. But despite its appeal, natural

treatment may not always be the most appropriate, the most effective, or even the safest. Dangerous side effects have been reported for many herbal products and even nutrients in high doses. And of course simply foregoing effective treatment may be a danger in itself. Yet many of my patients who will take a "natural" product without knowing what it is (assuming it is safe), read me the riot act if I want to prescribe a medication! Nature is not always safe. Hurricanes, rattlesnakes, and rabies are all natural. So are the great scourges that science has helped eradicate or control, like smallpox, malaria, and the plague. So given the potential advantages and disadvantages of both modern medicine and natural medicine, how can one make the best choices for the promotion of health, as well as the prevention and treatment of disease? The answer seems pretty self-evident: use the best of both worlds. Use natural medicine when it is safe and effective, and use modern medicine when it is safe and effective. If both are available for a particular condition, then choose based on personal preference. But be open-minded to the good, the bad, and the ugly in both nature and science to get the very best you can from both.

Straightforward in principle, in practice it's almost impossible to do. Your primary care doctor may not know about, or want to talk about, natural



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treatments (some will). A naturopath may not be able to give you good information about the best conventional treatment alternatives. And neither can give you evidence based on direct comparisons of the two types of treatments, because there isn't much of that evidence available. But we are working to change that. As of December 6, 1999, the Integrative Medicine Center (IMC) at Griffin Hospital will begin scheduling appointments. Those appointments will start in January. The Center will offer expert evaluation in both conventional and natural medicine, and help refer each patient to the very best and safest treatment or

strategy from either or both. The IMC will support outcomes research to advance our knowledge of what works best and most safely when and for whom. Holistic, open-minded, patient-directed medicine. A good way to start a new millennium. Call 732-1370 with inquiries; ask to speak with Lauren Liberti, IMC manager.

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Preventive Medicine Column

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