

I Am My Own Healer:

Millennial Perceptions of Complementary and Alternative Medicine

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English 298. Section 1.

Introduction

Although some methods are well established, Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) is not considered evidence-based medicine and is therefore not widely accepted in the practice of conventional medicine. In this study, the perceptions of people, especially those of the Millennial Generation, are examined in regard to their beliefs regarding CAM effectiveness and CAM practitioners. Understanding current perceptions and receptiveness to CAM therapies has important implications for future healthcare policies and practices, especially as the numerically large Millennial Generation ages and experiences more chronic healthcare conditions. Long recognized for skepticism of conventional institutions, the Millennial Generation has begun to bring alternative forms of health care into the social media spotlight of healthy living. As antibiotic and antiviral resistant illnesses continue to rise in occurrence, CAM usage may receive greater acceptance in order to preserve the pharmaceutical power of conventional drug therapies. Using a mix of published research review, representative subject interviews and marketing material observations, the beliefs of Millennials regarding CAM is explored in this study. This research will contribute to the understanding of CAM by reviewing the perceptions and opinions of Millennials regarding the use of CAM. Overall, it appears that CAM is increasing in acceptance and therefore CAM usage is increasing. Further research on these perceptions, including expanding the population of representative interviews, is needed to confirm these initial findings.

Literature Review

Across all demographics, CAM forms of healthcare use have risen in popularity over the past few years. Most notably, there has been an increase in the use of these treatments among

what is traditionally considered vulnerable populations, such as women, children, and the elderly. This rise in interest was quantified in a recent study on CAM usage as approximately one-third of the population in both the United States and in the United Kingdom visiting CAM practitioners. This rise in interest did not go unnoticed by doctors as more than two-thirds of family doctors in the United States have begun to increase their use of CAM therapies for treatments (National Cancer Institute).

There has been an especially large increase in interest for alternative treatments among women to help relieve some symptoms that come with pregnancy (Adams, J 365). This increase in interest has also been seen among pediatric patients, especially those who suffer from chronic or recurrent conditions (Adams, D 228). This suggests that CAM therapies are becoming more popular in today's society. However, when looking at interviews conducted with nursing and medical students, subjects reflect a contradictory opinion on the usefulness of CAM treatments, with only 33% of medical students believing that CAM treatments should be integrated into clinical practices (Yildirim 1160). This exposes a disparity between what the public desires and what medical training offers.

In previous research reviewed, young adults of the Millennial Generation were not interviewed about their opinions on CAM, yet their numerically large generation is the most health and wellness-focused generation demographic recorded. As a result of this observed gap, this study will further explore attitudes about CAM in the Millennial Generation to understand how this demographic group views CAM treatments and predict use trends going forward.

Methods

The methods used in this study were designed to gather first-hand accounts of perceptions regarding the success of CAM in treating conditions. To do this, three interviews

with representative people were conducted using a series of questions (see Appendix A). In addition, CAM marketing materials were reviewed to observe if the apparent intended audience was of the Millennial Generation age group.

Procedures

To conduct this study, a variety of subjects to interview about the use of CAM therapies was desired. A representative group was selected consisting of a practicing alternative healer, one undergraduate student, and an upperclassman pre-Med student. All subjects were of the Millennial Generation demographic, defined for the purposes of this study as anyone aged between 20 and 40 years. All students are from the University of Tennessee Knoxville, for the convenience of access.

Interview questions were about the individual's experience with, or use of, CAM methods, their knowledge of CAM, and their individual opinions about CAM therapies and practitioners. This series of questions were asked of all participants. However, more specific questions about the number of patients and treatments were asked of the current practicing alternative healer due to broader experience as a practitioner of CAM. Interviews were conducted over the phone or in a public space. For more information about the interview protocol, please see Appendix A.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data gathered in this study, patterns in the interview responses from each participant were examined. One of the patterns revealed was the amount of times subjects referenced other people's use and perceived benefit of the therapy they received. Additionally,

negative and positive word choice in the descriptions of their views and understandings of CAM were tabulated. Finally, the continuing skepticism regarding alternative medicine was examined

Participants

Interview Subject Rob is a practicing alternative healer who specializes in acupuncture and herbal remedies. He is the owner of a successful alternative medicine practice in Tennessee. Rob is a board-certified acupuncturist and oriental herbalist.

Interview Subject Sarah is a senior neuroscience student at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. She is interested in pursuing a career in the medical field. Sarah's experience with complementary and alternative medicine is limited to chiropractors assisting with sports injuries.

Interview Subject Emily is a current undergraduate student at the University of Tennessee who is studying genetics. While not immediately interested in the medical field, she enjoys learning about how the human genome can be transcribed and manipulated. Emily enjoys using essential oils and drinking herbal teas, as forms of alternative medicine, primarily for stress relief and relaxation.

Findings

In the interviews conducted, several patterns emerged.

Firstly, it seems that there is an increase in acceptance of and interest in CAM in the Millennial Generation when compared to older generations. In the interviews that were conducted, the participants universally responded that they were willing to explore CAM

practices prior to seeking traditional medical treatment. Rob¹ has seen an increase in client numbers over the 18 years he has owned his wellness center, with greater growth occurring in the last five years. He thinks that “generally in society, complementary medicine is becoming much more accepted” due to him “stay[ing] busy” and experiencing significant business growth within his wellness center.

Additionally, there is more awareness and use of complementary and alternative medicine by Millennials and their peers. This is observed in the responses of Sarah and Emily, both of whom referenced other people who have used CAM therapies. Sarah knew several people who had consulted a chiropractor for back pain and felt that the CAM treatments helped them. Emily also knew two college students who received CAM treatments, including chiropractic and acupuncture therapies. Both individuals that Emily knew felt that their treatments were effective and helped with their conditions. Also, Emily currently uses essential oils and aromatherapy daily as a college student. She feels that the oils, such as eucalyptus, help her “reduce stress and improve concentration”. Sarah also shared that she too uses aromatherapy, since it seems to not cause harm and “smells good”.

However, there is still skepticism about CAM’s effectiveness in treating more serious conditions. Rob believes that while most people have a positive perception of CAM, “there is probably a ... percentage of people that think it’s either ineffective or unsafe”. He goes on to source this skepticism as being due to “ignorance and negative propaganda... [and doctors] are not saying the [whole] truth” about alternative medicine. The feelings that people are not wholly accepting of CAM is also seen in the interviews with college student Sarah. Sarah is suspicious about the real effectiveness of the treatments and thinks that they are not better at treating

¹ All names are pseudonyms used to preserve participant confidentiality.

conditions, especially short-term conditions, then traditional medical practices. All interview subjects did not reveal or discuss any participation in any CAM methods with any traditional doctors during conventional treatments. Additionally, all could not reference any doctor asking about CAM or suggesting CAM practices as part of the overall comprehensive treatment plan. Rob referenced professional discussions with conventional medicine practitioners.

Discussion

The results of this study echoed the results found in other studies that were reviewed in secondary research. Interest in CAM treatments has indeed increased over the past few years and seems to have especially become popular in the age of social media and the Millennial Generation as a low impact way to improve health and the body's wellness. By using social media to post about the benefits of CAM treatments and the relatively harmless way of receiving the treatments, the Millennial Generation has redefined the stereotype of CAM being ineffective and has instead marketed the treatments as being able to improve the body's natural state.

While there does seem to be an increase in interest in CAM, suspicions remain about how effective the treatments are. These suspicions seem to be raised mostly by older generations, and by individuals in the medical field. This exhibits the difference in views between popular science and academic science. Participants feelings of suspicion around CAM's effectiveness in this study is consistent with the findings of the National Cancer Institute, where scientific and physician communities voiced concerns that the value of CAM interventions was no more effective than a placebo treatment.

Additionally, the study found that use of CAM treatments, specifically essential oils, is largely unreported to doctors and is done independently. This confirms the results found in the study *Complementary and Alternative Medicine Use by Pediatric Specialty Outpatients*,

conducted by Adams, which found that 23% of CAM use is not reported to physicians. This reluctance to openly share CAM use with traditional medical practitioners could create medical issues due to the possibility of CAM therapies, including essential oils, potentially increasing the strength and effectiveness of certain pharmaceutical drugs (Lemos). Reluctance to discuss the use of CAM with physicians could be due to fear patients fear that they will receive negative feedback from doctors and from doctors not specifically asking about CAM use. The reluctance to share about CAM usage is a relatively new problem and a major obstacle in the healthcare industry, however, this could be overcome with increased training for physicians about CAM therapies and how they can be successfully integrated into a treatment plan.

Conclusion

From the results of my study, it seems that people, especially Millennials, are becoming more accepting of the idea of CAM. This study begins the process of looking at how younger generations view CAM as a healthier and more balanced way of living and view the “wonder drugs” of large pharmaceutical companies as potentially having unintended but harmful aspects that could be destructive to the body’s natural defenses. Going forward, more research with a larger population will need to be conducted to ensure accuracy and provide sustainability to the argument that younger generations are more accepting of alternative forms of healthcare than older populations.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Questions For Millennial Students:

1. Are you familiar with the Complementary and Alternative medicine?
2. How do people you know use alternative medicine?
3. Have you ever received alternative treatment?
4. How do you feel modern medicine uses alternative medicine and natural supplements?

How could it be improved?

5. Do you share your knowledge and use of Complementary and Alternative medicine with your doctors?
6. Do you believe that people understand alternative medicine?
7. Do you personally feel like alternative medicine is successful? Why or why not?
8. What is your opinion of public perception of alternative medicine?

Questions for Current Practitioner:

1. What role does herbal remedies and natural medicine play in your job?
2. How do people you know use alternative medicine?
3. How do you use alternative medicine in your practice?
4. How do you feel modern medicine uses alternative medicine and natural supplements?

How could it be improved?

5. Have you seen an increase in patients? How do you typically gain patients?
6. Do you believe that people understand alternative medicine?
7. Do you personally feel like alternative medicine is successful? Why or why not?
8. What is your opinion of public perception of alternative medicine?