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Federal funds help growth of alternative treatments

Research: Grants support rigorous scientific studies

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Alternative health treatments in general have seen a dramatic increase in popularity and acceptance during the past few years, sparked in part by rising dissatisfaction with traditional medicine and corporations that deliver it and in part by a growing body of research that lends credence to longstanding claims about the benefits of some nontraditional methods.

An important factor in the recent growth of interest in alternative medicine has been a federal program that underwrites research into various nontraditional treatments. The National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, a unit of the National Institutes of Health, was formed in 1998 as the successor to an earlier program, the Office of Alternative Medicine, which was created in 1992 in response to a Congressional mandate.

Projects funded by the center have helped overcome some of the public and scientific skepticism concerning treatments like acupuncture. A body of rigorous scientific research is accumulating that suggests that many of these treatments do help relieve various symptoms, even if their mechanisms aren't well explained.

Acupuncture was among the first alternative treatments to be studied extensively, and media reports of supportive studies helped spark an explosion in the number of practitioners. In the Tampa Bay area, about six people a year received licenses to practice acupuncture between 1982 and 1993. In 1994, the number jumped to 29 and has averaged 26 new licenses a year since then. So far this year, 23 new licenses have been issued.

Overall, the number of licensed acupuncturists in the Bay area has soared from under 40 in 1990 to more than 200 today.

Treatment methods that are being studied under National Center auspices fall under the following basic categories:

- Mind-body medicine -- Includes yoga, Tai Chi, biofeedback, **hypnosis**, spiritual healing, intuitive healing and meditation, besides more traditional methods such as psychotherapy.
- Alternative medical systems -- Includes acupuncture, herbology, traditional indigenous systems (e.g., Native American medicine and curanderismo), psychic surgery and homeopathy.
- Lifestyle and disease prevention -- Includes exercise and dietary regimens; to be considered as complementary and alternative medicine, must be based on nonorthodox or non-Western systems.
- Biologically based therapies -- Includes herbalism, special diets (e.g., Pritikin, macrobiotic, etc.), hyperbaric oxygen and bioresonance.

- Manipulative and body-based systems -- Includes chiropractic, massage, hydrotherapy, colonic therapy and breathing techniques.
- Biofield -- Involves systems that posit a "subtle energy field" in and around the body.
- Biomagnetics -- Systems that use electromagnetic fields for therapeutic purposes.
- The Bay area also is home to practitioners and instructors in some forms of healing that are even more esoteric than acupuncture or aromatherapy.
- Some of the healing methods offered by Bay area practitioners listed in The New Radiance Metaphysical & Holistic Florida Directory, published in Largo, include:
- Chakra and aura balancing, which the directory defines as "clearing, smoothing or harmonizing" the aura, an energy field postulated to surround the body, or the chakras, spiritual energy centers inside the body.
- Reiki, "a 'laying on of hands' therapy that treats the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual bodies," according to New Radiance.
- Therapeutic touch, which, paradoxically, involves healing by passing the hands over the patient's body without touching him.
- Reflexology, the practice of massaging the feet and/or hands to affect other parts of the body.

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