

The Future of Integrative Medical Leadership

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Abstract

As complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) becomes widely available and popular, leadership must integrate this holistic healthcare approach into the conventional medical model while maintaining its unique essence. Bridging the gap between conventional medicine, doctors, and holistic practitioners will be the fundamental goal as the United States steps into a patient-centered approach to health. Only in CAM do you see the body, mind, and spirit beautifully woven into the foundation of a complete healthcare system. Our jobs as leaders in integrative medicine are to embrace the strengths of mainstream health and celebrate the exceptionalism of the whole-being approach now sweeping across the nation. The trends driving CAM integration into conventional medicine necessitate a specific leadership to step forward. That leadership will ultimately shape the necessary changes in our healthcare system.

Future of Integrative Leadership

In Demand

Conventional medicine in the USA has two main solutions for symptoms: medication and surgery. What if the patient is looking for more? According to Vankar (2023), in 2021, twenty-four percent of adults used herbal medicine, fifteen percent used essential oils, and nine percent used acupuncture as part of their health care. According to the US Dept. of Health and Human Services (n.d.), from 2002 to 2022, acupuncture use in the United States more than doubled from 3.7 million users to 8.2 million users. This interest is even reflected in the research. Between 2012 and 2021, the number of research articles published in integrative medicine doubled (Song et al., 2022).

According to Holistic Medicine versus Western Medicine (2024), several factors may be responsible for this uptrend in holistic medicine. For one, alternative therapies are more available than ever, giving patients more access to choose their therapy. Secondly, holistic medicine can cover many illnesses, which appeals to those tired of endless visits to various doctors. Third, there is a growing trend toward distrust of modern medical professionals as patients become more concerned about adverse reactions and side effects.

In addition, Seetharaman et al. (2021) discuss the trends affecting the public that contribute to the interest in integrative medicine. For one, patients are confused and lost by repetitive tests, numerous specialists, and growing prescriptions, and many wonder who is overseeing the whole process (Sierpina & Dalen, 2013).

Relatedly, chronic disease issues plague the United States, with 129 million having at least one chronic disease (Benavidez, 2024). Integrative and modern medical science agree that the patient's digestive health plays a role in chronic disease. In fact, Chinese medicine lays the foundation in its principles that digestion, one of the ways to renew energy in the body, is the most influential and essential component of long-term health. Ayurvedic medicine follows suit

with a strong emphasis on gut health and the microbiome (Wallace, 2020). With digestive complaints problems creating 105 ambulatory care visits annually, the role of gut health cannot be ignored in conventional medicine (Almarino et al., 2018). This is just one example of chronic health problems in the United States that are driving patients to seek out integrative medicine. However, Seetharaman et al. (2021) lays out other and equally important reasons for the public's interest in integrative health in the table below.

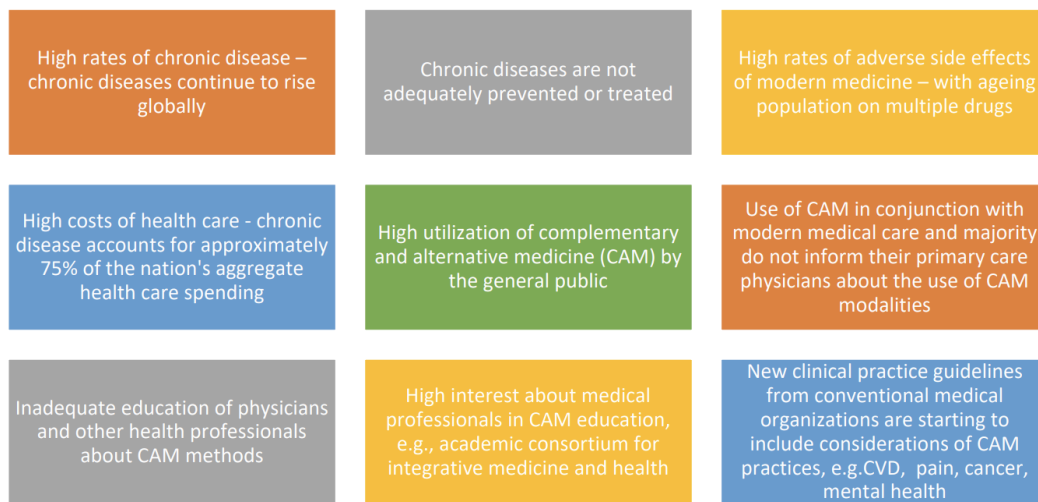


Figure 1(Seetharaman et al., 2021, p.2). Trends driving integration in The Future of Medicine.

Another factor driving integrative medicine is the advantages of holistic medicine. For instance, Traditional Chinese Medicine promotes wellness and prevention, presents minimal side effects, and enhances patient serenity by addressing the body, mind, and spirit (Closing the Distance, 2024). Sierpina and Dalen (2013, p. 1) share a similar outlook with patients seeking out “longer consultations” that “emphasize minimally invasive therapies, such as mind-body approaches, nutrition, prevention, and lifestyle changes, and focus on healing and wellness.” Following suit are hospitals like NY Presbyterian Health, Johns Hopkins Integrative Medicine

Center, University of Maryland School of Medicine Office of Integrative Medicine, UCLA Health Center of East-West Medicine, and Arizona Holistic Cancer Center (to name just a few) offering integrative health to their patients to bring a personalized, complementary, alternative, mindful and preventative care practice to their hospitals.

Patients are looking for medicine that helps them across multiple symptoms. They also have been disenchanted when conventional medicine lacks a solution to their chronic disease or, worse yet when they don't feel well, but nothing can be diagnostically found. This opens the door for patients to seek out alternative therapies. This growing trend dictates that our healthcare system should look in that direction and bring those therapies to all demographics and socioeconomic statuses so that everyone has access across the nation. As this shift occurs, more than ever, integrative leadership is needed to transform healthcare by empowering patients in their healthcare, regaining trust in medicine, focusing on client awareness, and standing true to the principles and strengths of holistic medicine.

Strengths of Integrative Health

One of the most notable reasons patients turn to CAM is the individualized attention that empowers patients for self-care and prevention (Horrigan, 2004). While conventional medicine dictates how many patients should be seen in an hour or how long the doctor spends with each patient, patients want to develop relationships and gain trust and confidence in their providers. Integrative medicine offers healthcare more humanely and integrally than conventional medicine, according to Schweitzer et al. (2024), where compassion and caring are fundamental to healing illness (Horrigan, 2004). This is about healthcare meeting the patient's needs, not just alleviating symptoms (Schweitzer et al., 2024).

Difficulties arise in conventional medicine due to the orientation of controlling disease symptoms (Schweitzer et al., 2024). Holistic medicine needs to maintain its steadfast hold on going beyond symptomatic treatment and avoid falling prey to fitting into the reductionist

thinking model. This differentiation is essential for the integrative medicine leader, balancing the combination of CAM and conventional without losing the exceptionalism of each medicine. For instance, diagnostics are unparalleled in conventional medicine, and so are life-saving surgical interventions. However, as mentioned above, it needs to be improved in many aspects of meeting the patient's health needs. Astin et al. (2003, p. 147), with a systematic review, showed that an “array of mind-body therapies can be used as effective adjuncts to conventional medical treatment for a number of common clinical conditions” with significant cost savings.

As patients learn about different available healthcare options, the doorway opens for them to start comprehending more esoteric concepts like qi, prana, and energy. Patients are opening themselves up to the idea that more exists beyond what they can see and are looking for health solutions that allow them to access this energy for health. For instance, Heart Math and biofield electromagnetic studies are bringing into awareness this subtle energy that makes up all matter. And even if this kind of work is a stretch for most people, they realize they feel good physically, mentally, and emotionally after participating in CAM.

Doctor Acceptance

Another aspect of integrative health leadership is bridging the gap between two worlds that may skeptically look at one another. There are still doctors who “do not believe” in CAM, like Chinese medicine. Meeting those doctors in an educated and understanding way can help shift the perspective around CAM. It's not just about hiring professionals offering complementary therapies but embracing the highly individualized holistic approach/view of health and healing (Schweitzer et al., 2024). A diplomatic leader must gain acceptance into the system by co-workers and allopathic doctors.

Integral to bridging the gap is an understanding of the “biological, psychological, social and spiritual” (body, mind, spirit) aspects of disease and illness (Hyman, 2004). This does not mean holistic practitioners forgo research or searching for how these therapies work. It means

accepting the patient's response as valid proof when it shows up every day. However, striving for excellence in each modality and across all disciplines should always be the driving force that brings legitimacy to CAM. The integrative leader will follow science-based research and studies that support all modalities while concentrating on the benefits, experiences, and current research that can help bring clarity to minds struggling to grasp the ideas of energy and qi. Acknowledging technical skills, clinical knowledge, and spiritual contributions in the integrative approach can restore health to the healthcare system it serves (Horrigan, 2004).

New Leadership

No matter how individuals feel about the latest election, one benefit for CAM has emerged in 2024. Robert Kennedy Jr. wants to implement insurance coverage for holistic and alternative therapies nationwide. It may be hard to articulate how this will play out right now, but this kind of discussion on the national stage iterates how critical integrative medicine is. This is a time to have clear goals for spotlighting the strengths of CAM, put together collaborative teams that embrace the community and strive for excellence, and be ready to step into new roles in healthcare in the United States.

Integrative medicine leaders have the potential to revolutionize healthcare by stressing health promotion and disease prevention for all. Leaders can take the momentum of science, patient demand, and widening availability to illuminate the strengths of these complementary therapies for the health of the body, mind, and spirit. Now is the time to stay committed to the holistic goals of CAM, listen to what the patients need, foster their empowerment, and lead by example with knowledge, determination, integrity, compassion, honesty, and commitment to excellence.

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