

Health care

Many patients pursue integrative and alternative treatments

Seeking healthy alternatives

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Randy Siner | NMBW

Dr. Stephen Weiss, a homeopathic M.D., uses holistic kinesiology techniques with a patient at his Duke City office.

Andrea Lapin says she owes her life to a medical treatment she didn't believe in: alternative and homeopathic medicine.

The 45-year-old Albuquerque writer was in a car crash with a drunk driver two years ago, she says. After the crash, strange and frightening things started happening to her.

"I was physically weak. I had right-side weakness. I'd wake up at night seeing spots and colors. I wouldn't be able to use my right arm. My heart would race. I'd have terrible headaches. Sometimes I wouldn't be able to even articulate to people what was happening to me," Lapin says.

Knowing she had a family history of strokes, Lapin sought help from a neurologist and other doctors. They ordered MRIs and other diagnostic tests. Lapin didn't have health insurance, and

had to pay for the tests upfront. She spent \$10,000 with no results. The bleeding in her brain, it turned out, wasn't obvious enough to show up on the MRIs.

The neurologist lost interest in her after the tests proved inconclusive, Lapin says. Another doctor told her to get her affairs in order, as she would soon be dead. A third told her she was crazy, she says.

Lapin phoned Dr. **Stephen Weiss**, a homeopathic M.D. in Albuquerque. During her first visit with Weiss, she suffered a ministroke. After some investigation, Weiss found a treatment he thought would work for her.

“The horrible events I was having stopped almost immediately after taking the treatment,” Lapin says, adding that the symptoms have been gone for about a year. “He found a remedy that was made out of snake venom. He was my snake-oil doctor, and I’ve used him ever since.”

Weiss, who has been practicing medicine for more than 20 years, combines so-called traditional, or Western, medicine with his homeopathic practice. It's called integrative medicine.

Some segments of integrative and alternative health are growing, as patients faced with spiraling costs for pharmaceutical-based treatments pursue other forms of relief.

According to the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, 38 percent of U.S. adults, or 83 million people, used some form of alternative medicine in 2007, the latest year for which statistics are available. Americans spent \$33.9 billion out of pocket on complementary and alternative medicine expenses that year, according to the National Health Statistics Reports study by the [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services](#).

A 1997 study showed that 67.8 percent of adults sought some form of complementary or alternative treatment. Since then, visits to acupuncturists and professional complementary/alternative provider groups have increased, while visits to relaxation therapists and energy healers decreased dramatically, the study said.

The figures can be hard to track, because alternative medicine is almost anything that isn't pharmaceutical-based. It includes acupuncture; yoga; meditation; hypnosis; chiropractic care; movement, light and magnet therapies; deep breathing; Ayurvedic medicine; and herbs and supplements.

Eating yogurt can be considered alternative medicine, because of its live microorganisms, says the NCCAM.

Treating the whole person

The idea behind many alternative medicine practices is to treat the whole body, including the mind and spirit, not just a symptom. It's also intended to maximize the body's natural healing abilities, Weiss adds.

Homeopathic products are made from plants, animals and minerals, and their sales are booming. West Virginia-based Washington Homeopathic Products says its sales increased by 27 percent in 2009.

One reason for the increase could be that homeopathic products are inexpensive in comparison to pharmaceuticals. A half-dram vial of a homeopathic remedy retails for \$15, Weiss says. That small vial provides three to 15 doses, he adds.

“The amazing thing about homeopathy is that a lot of patients don’t take the treatment every day. Sometimes they just take one dose. The actual medicine is inexpensive,” Weiss adds.

Albuquerque physical therapist **David Garcia** uses several alternative healing methods in his practice at LaVie Rehabilitation, including deep breathing, therapeutic exercises and Kinesio taping.

The taping method uses an adhesive-backed athletic-therapeutic tape applied to the body in various patterns. The tape lifts the skin and underlying tissues to allow for better flow of lymphatic fluids. It’s used to relieve pain and swelling and to align joints, Garcia says.

“The way you breathe can have a profound effect,” Garcia adds. “A lot of people come in with very shallow breathing. Breathing deeply can help reduce tension in the upper shoulder. It can be a big stress reliever.”

Garcia uses his therapies to treat a variety of people, including top-performing athletes and geriatric patients.

“The focus is different. With the athlete, it’s trying to knock a few seconds off their time or getting them to jump higher. With others, it’s just trying to get them to walk across the room so they can go to the bathroom,” Garcia adds.

What’s covered

Some alternative practices are covered by health insurance plans. Both the Lovelace and Presbyterian health plans cover chiropractic and acupuncture treatments for their commercial members.

[Lovelace Health Plan](#), with 235,000 members, can customize commercial group plans with more than 100 members to cover certain types of alternative therapies.

“The most important thing for us is that we recognize the needs of our customer groups,” says Dr. **John Cruickshank**, chief medical officer for Lovelace Health Plan. “If groups want to add certain complementary and alternative treatments, that is something we would look at.”

Lovelace also offers discounts for vitamins and nutritional supplements at its 12 pharmacies, Cruickshank added.

The 400,000-member [Presbyterian Health Plan](#) covers acupuncture and chiropractic services, says spokeswoman **Elizabeth Brophy**.

For Lapin, getting into that car crash was the “best worst thing” that ever happened to her. Because of it, she found Dr. Weiss and alternative medicine, an idea she had previously dismissed.

“I have most of the strength back in my right side. If you looked at me, you would not know it had happened to me,” Lapin says.