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Sutter West Medical Group
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The New World of Integrative Medicine

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Anyone who pays attention to trends in healthcare will have inevitably run across the term “**Integrative Medicine**” with increasing frequency. Articulate and charismatic physician spokespersons such as Depak Chopra and Andrew Weil have been spreading the term in every form of media over the last decade, and people are paying attention. So what kind of medicine is this, and what, exactly, is being “integrated”?

To understand this, it helps to know a little bit about the consumer trends in healthcare. By far, the most popular form of medicine in the western world is allopathic medicine. This is the conventional healthcare with which we are all familiar; Medical Doctors trained in medical schools and hospitals diagnose our problems, write our prescriptions for medications, and utilize the most recent advances in technology to treat our illnesses. But despite its popularity and the success stories associated with modern “miracle” drugs, surgery and ancillary treatments, the healthcare consuming public has recognized limitations in the scope of modern allopathic medicine, and is turning to other possibilities.

The term “**alternative medicine**” has been used, beginning in the sixties, to encompass all forms of healthcare not routinely considered to be a part of conventional allopathic medicine. More recently, as providers of conventional medicine have begun to warm up to the possibility of other approaches, and as the public has begun to move more easily back and forth between conventional and alternative treatments, the term “complementary” has been added to form the expression “**complementary/alternative medicine**” or **CAM**. The concept of CAM is that conventional medicine, and that which lies outside of the scope of conventional medicine, are not mutually exclusive; they can exist harmoniously. And thus is born the field of integrative medicine.

Integrative Medicine is a new area in healthcare designed to provide the best of both worlds. CAM practitioners in healing specialties as diverse as acupuncture, massage therapy, chiropractics, herbal therapy, homeopathy, spiritual counseling, and biofeedback work side by side with Medical Doctors in diagnosing and treating medical problems, and in helping patients achieve and maintain a high level of wellness. Physicians who practice integrative medicine look carefully at the growing body of

scientific literature involving CAM therapies to determine which are the most effective for specific illnesses. And CAM therapists can rely on the Integrative Medicine physician to assure that diagnoses are not missed, and to help open the door to modern medical technology when it is appropriate and necessary.

What has caused the creation of this new area in medicine? The answer lies in all of us, the healthcare consuming public. This has been a movement not stimulated by business tactics or political pressures, but rather by millions of people using CAM on a regular basis.

In a study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association in 1998, a group of Harvard researchers led by Dr. David Eisenberg conducted a national survey looking at the prevalence and cost of CAM use in the United States. They found that between 1990 and 1997, the number of visits to CAM therapists increased by 47.3% from 427 million to 629 million. Amazingly, the number of visits to CAM therapists in 1997 actually exceeded the total number of visits to all U.S. primary care physicians!

And national trends are being echoed locally. In an informal survey conducted in Davis by Sutter West Medical Group in 1999, 60% of respondents said that they had used some type of CAM therapy within the last year (the two most popular being massage therapy and herbal medicine). And 90% stated that they would use CAM services if they were to be provided by their medical group.

Only time will tell if the popularity of complementary/alternative medicine will continue to grow, and if Integrative Medicine will become an established specialty within our healthcare system. Some proponents of Integrative Medicine suggest that the terms currently being used will eventually become obsolete. There will no longer be alternative medicine, complementary medicine, or conventional medicine. There will just be GOOD medicine.