The One Thing Alternative Medicine Gets Right

By Alex Berezow, PhD — June 11, 2018

Every time I'm in Poland, I make several trips to our favorite massage therapist. Because of the exchange rate and the lower cost of labor, I can get an hour-long massage for just over $30.

Our massage therapist is also a bit kooky. She opposes much of what I accept, such as genetically modified food, and she believes in alternative medicine of all types, particularly reflexology. When she pinches your toe, she thinks she's fixing your liver, or something.

One time, due to my poor Polish skills, I accidentally agreed to a cupping session. My personal (and painful) encounter with alternative medicine confirmed what I always thought -- it's a load of garbage. But, I don't care what she believes in, because I'm there for the awesome $30-massage and soothing tunes of Keali'i Reichel.

Before becoming a massage therapist, she was a psychologist, so she likes to talk. Every session begins with a chat about my work, my wife, my family. She asks if we're happy. She asks about our trip to Europe. She tells me about her family. And because she knows I'm not that good at Polish, she sprinkles in a few grammar lessons. Though I would prefer a little less talking and a little more massaging, that's not a bad deal for $30.

During my most recent massage, it finally dawned on me why some people find alternative medicine so appealing: Many of its practitioners seem to genuinely care about your well-being. When was the last time your doctor asked not just about your physical health, but your mental, social, and spiritual well-being? (And, no, that questionnaire you fill out in the waiting room doesn't count.) When was the last time your doctor asked if you were happy?

For most people, probably rarely or never. And that's where modern medicine goes wrong.
The One Thing Alternative Medicine Gets Right: Compassion

Don't get me wrong. I love my general practitioner. He’s intelligent, funny, and seems to enjoy visiting with me. I also think he might have Tourette syndrome, which makes me like him even more. Because he knows I'm a scientist, he can explain medical phenomena to me at a more sophisticated level than he could with other patients.

But at the end of the day, it's still hard for me not to feel like a used car in a mechanic's shop. There's poking and prodding, and all sorts of unmentionable orifices are examined (usually mine, not his). The room is sterile and unwelcoming. He is often in a bit of a hurry because he has multiple patients in the waiting room. Thus, a doctor's office doesn't feel comfortable, no matter how nice the doctor is.

That lack of comfort is probably why some people don't feel that doctors really care about them. That may be all it takes for a person to turn to alternative medicine. Even though it's almost entirely touchy-feely nonsense, people are hooked by the touchy-feely. They want compassion, and alternative medicine practitioners are masters at delivering that.

Making Healthcare More Compassionate

Doctors already are compassionate, but they may not come off that way. Is there a way to improve that? Probably. Slowing down and spending more time chatting with patients may be a good start, even if it means having fewer patients overall. Changing the feel of the exam room would probably help, too; maybe hide the tongue depressors and find a replacement for that butcher shop paper we normally sit on. And a little Keali'i Reichel can't hurt.

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