

# Translating Evidence to the Masses: The Role of the Media in Communicating about CAM

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Evidence in Complementary Medicine: Getting it Right  
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## Objective

- To examine how the media reports CAM research

## Outline

- Primary characteristics of media reporting about CAM research
- Reasons for such reporting
- Implications of such reporting

## Can Herbs Fight Cancer?

*Herbs may ward off cancer indirectly through their immune-stimulating properties. But in recent years, researchers have begun identifying biologically active chemicals in plants that actually fight cancer, such as sulforaphane in broccoli and lycopene in tomatoes. Herbs contain scores of these chemicals that may, like drugs, turn out to have a therapeutic effect.*

– Prevention, Sept 1998

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## Characteristics of Media Reporting

### 1. REDUCTIONIST

## Cancer and Hope

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2. PHYSICAL MECHANISMS OF ACTION

**Cancer**  
**JUICE, SPINACH, SUPPLEMENTS**  
**Folate Cuts This Colon Risk**

If you have a family history of colon cancer, getting 400 micrograms (mcg) of folate a day (the recommended daily amount) may cut your risk by more than 50%.

When Harvard University researchers examined the eating habits of 88,000 women, they found that those with a family history who got that amount—

Secret anti-cancer ingredient inside.

from foods or supplements—brought their risk down to normal levels. And women with no family history who got folate dropped risk an extra 14% (Cancer Prevention, Banerjee, and Perren, Mar 2002). Researcher Charles Stewart Fuchs, MD, recommends a multivitamin in order to get enough every day. —JM

**WHEN DRUGS FAIL**  
**ACUPUNCTURE REFRESHES PARCHED MOUTHS**

When 50 cancer patients tried acupuncture treatments to relieve severe dry mouth, 70% found relief.

The treatment consisted of three needles inserted at specific points on each ear and one inserted near the tip of each index finger. Most patients required weekly or twice-weekly treatments for the first few weeks and ultimately needed monthly or twice-monthly sessions (Cancer, Feb 15, 2002).

**ON THE**  
**Compound Fixes Cell Flow**

A newly discovered compound may help repair the body's own defenses against cancer.

Called PRIMA-1, this chemical appears to reverse the silencing of mutant p53, which prompts cell death in response to DNA damage and abnormal cell growth," says researcher Kiyas Minam, MD, PhD, of the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm, Sweden. Banerjee

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## There's the Rub

*To find a qualified practitioner, ask your doctor or chiropractor for a recommendation.*

- Chatelaine, March 2000

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## Reasons for Reporting CAM as Conventional Medicine

1. This is what journalists are used to.
2. This is what audiences are used to.

## Journalistic Constraints

- Time
- Editorial
- Knowledge

## The Use of Templates

- An efficient and effective means to communicate

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3. **The sources that journalists use.**

## Framing

- How issues are communicated
  - Language and word choice
  - Stress certain attributes, ignore others

## Media Reports of Herbal Remedy Clinical Trials

86% of media reports were based on trials published in the British Medical Journal, the Journal of the American Medical Association and the Lancet.

Bubela T, Caulfield T, Boon H. (2006). Trends in evidence based medicine for herbal remedies and media coverage. *Health Law Review*, 15(1), 3-8.

*It has not been scientifically tested and its advocates largely deny the need for such testing. By testing we mean the marshaling of rigorous evidence of safety and efficacy, as required by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for the approval of drugs and by the best peer-reviewed medical journals for the publication of research reports... Many advocates of alternative medicine... believe the scientific method is simply not applicable to their remedies. They instead rely on anecdotes and theories.*

Angell M, Kassirer JP. (1998). Alternative medicine--the risks of untested and unregulated remedies. *New England Journal of Medicine*, 339, 839-841.

## Lots of News on Prostates

*First a warning: An alternative treatment for prostate cancer called PC-SPES--a potent mix of eight herbs, including saw palmetto and licorice--may have unwanted side effects. A report out last week finds that while the herbal alternative does lower levels of PSA (a marker for the cancer), it may be linked to breast tenderness, loss of libido and possibly blood clots. Now some guidance for men undergoing traditional care. Those who have a slow-growing cancer can survive for years with conservative treatment, like periodic monitoring or hormonal therapy. But men with more aggressive cancer seem to fare better with surgery or external radiation than with, say, radioactive-seed implants.*

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1. It portrays a controversy:
  - CAM vs. Conventional Medicine
2. It changes what CAM is.

## CAM vs. Conventional Medicine

- Opposites
  - To simplify complicated information
  - A familiar argument
  - Pros and Cons

## FAITH OR MEDICINE?

*A judge orders chemotherapy after a boy says no*

- Maclean's, March 29, 1999

## Chemo with Herbs on the Side

*Oncologists such as Dr. Sawka feel frustrated when patients ask about herbs such as cat's claw. Believing that doctors need to stay on top of the latest research, she says, "The problem is, I can't get my hands on decent data, so I can't say anything with certainty to my patients."*

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## Chemo with Herbs on the Side

*Perhaps the brightest light on the horizon is the Canadian Breast Cancer Research Initiative, which has earmarked up to \$1.5 million for alternative research. Director Marilyn Schneider says, "Our forums showed us many women are using alternative remedies. But they're using them with very little knowledge. We undertook the challenge to learn more." Schneider and her team will fund projects carried out by both the traditional and alternative medicine camps. Within a few years, the BCRI should produce the kind of scientific studies that the MDs need.*

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## CAM vs. Conventional Medicine

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- |                |                  |
|----------------|------------------|
| ■ Unscientific | ■ Evidence-based |
| ■ Irrational   | ■ Rational       |

# NOTHING Left to LOSE

When conventional medicine failed them, these four cancer patients—three of them terminal—turned to alternative treatments that have never been scientifically proven to work. They're all still alive

**▶ AS FAR AS THEIR DOCTORS WERE CONCERNED,** David Yotlie, Bill Mears, and little Katie Hartley were goners. Their cancers were terminal. And 16-year-old Billy Best's doctor told him that if he chose alternative treatment over his chemotherapy, he'd be committing suicide. Despite their doctors' dire predictions, these four people are alive today. For teenager Katie Hartley, it's been more than 7 years since her doctor told her parents that she had only 2 weeks to live. And except for these four people, their families, and a few other true believers, no one is quite sure why.

- Prevention, August 2002

### Bill Mears Had a Year to Live

In 1984, when he was 53, Bill Mears, an engineer from Kennett Square, PA, was diagnosed with melanoma (skin cancer) inside the sinus behind his left eye. After extensive surgery ("They took my head apart," he recalls), surgeons removed an olive-size tumor. Mears went on with his life, believing himself cured. But just 3 years later, the cancer returned. Surgeons removed as much as they could, but offered little hope.

In May 1988, a new tumor was found in his abdomen. Mears nixed the idea of chemotherapy, and surgery wasn't even offered as an option, because he wasn't expected to live very long. A physician he was seeing for nutritional support recommended Dr. Gonzalez, who accepted Mears as a patient. By December 1988, the tumor had finally stopped growing. In 1993, the tumor (which, according to pathology reports, seemed to be "dying") was removed. According to Mears, his surgeon at Memorial Sloan-Kettering, a top cancer center in New York City, admitted that "whatever I [Mears] was doing was having a beneficial effect."

Now 70, Mears skis, splits wood, and travels the world with his wife.

### The Jury's Still Out

Like other practitioners who treat cancer with alternative therapies, Dr. Gonzalez has evoked a range of reactions from the medical establishment and the media. He has been sued for malpractice. A January 2000 story in the *Washington Post* questioned why federal funds were used to study a program designed by a doctor whom they alleged "lacks traditional training in cancer treatment and has been disciplined by a state medical board."

Others, notably Jeffrey White, MD, director of the Office of Cancer Complementary and Alternative Medicine (OCCAM) at the National Cancer Institute in Bethesda, MD, aren't so quick to dismiss him. Unlike some unconventional healers, Dr. Gonzalez has insisted that his methods be scientifically studied, and he has refused to train other healers in his methods until the treatments are proven.

**"What Dr. Gonzalez has done is what I hope more alternative practitioners will attempt," says Dr. White. "Namely, to gather hard data about the effectiveness of their therapies and have it published in the scientific literature ... instead of simply marketing themselves and their treatments directly to patients."**

- Prevention, August 2002

## CAM vs. Conventional Medicine

- Unscientific
- Irrational
- No need to conduct research
- Evidence-based
- Rational
- Always engaged in research process

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## What isn't said?

- By describing CAM in conventional medical terms, the unique philosophies behind many CAM treatments are forgotten.
- e.g., traditional Chinese medicine, yoga

## Just Say Om

*What if you combined the two--exercise and meditation? That's yoga, and a number of studies are under way to determine the health benefits of this twofer exercise.*

- Prevention, October 2005

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## Just Say Om

### *Pose Perks*

*The Bridge Pose opens the chest and strengthens legs.*

*The Reclining Cobbler Pose stretches your inner thighs, groin, and knees.*

- Prevention, October 2005

Discourses produce  
their objects

## Biomedical CAM

- A biomedical discourse causes CAM to lose:
  - Holism
  - Individualism
  - Spirituality/Awareness

## Ideal Health Care

- Inclusive, integrative
- Respects a range of modalities
- Respects patient beliefs and values
- Based on a range of evidence

Thank you for your time.

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