

Media and complementary medicines

In the sixth article in a series on complementary medicine, **Edzard Ernst** questions the affect the media has on the reputation of these treatments

The British public are voting with their feet and wallets in favour of complementary medicine (CM), and it is mainly through this grass-roots movement that pharmacists, doctors and other conventional health care professionals take any notice of CM at all. This simple but undeniable fact has several important ramifications, not least the “undue influence” of the media over CM.¹

It is difficult today to find a newspaper that does not contain one or two articles on CM. Nearly all the Sunday papers and women’s magazines have regular columns on the subject, many of them written by journalists rather than health care professionals. Almost without exception, these amount to uncritical, often ill-informed praise of CM. Comparing articles on CM in four leading British papers (*The Times*, *The Independent*, *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Guardian*) with those in the four leading German papers, we showed that, in the UK, much more attention was focused on CM (see Table).² In addition, compared with articles dealing with mainstream medicine, the tone was remarkably positive.

Electronic information

More and more people are turning towards electronic media for information on health matters³ but we have shown, repeatedly, that the majority of websites advising consumers on CM are promoting therapies which are not evidence-based. Many of these are overtly misleading to the point where health is put at risk.^{4,5} Uncritical, often commercially motivated promotion of CM by the print and electronic media seems to have become the rule rather than the exception. Its consequences should not be underestimated.

Politicians are probably more likely to read the daily papers than *The Lancet* or *The Pharmaceutical Journal*. They are thus exposed to an unbalanced view on CM. It is conceivable, even likely, that this incessant exposure to exaggerations and half-truths will influence major health care decisions in the UK. Recent news about moves towards the integration of unproven treatments into the NHS seems to indicate that this process is already well under way.⁶

Trial by media

Furthermore, I fear that this “trial by media” will have harmful effects for CM itself. However one defines CM, it is quite undeniably medicine. Trivialising it day in day out in the media has the potential to turn it gradu-



Results of a Google search

ally into something rather different — anything from a fashion accessory to a sociological phenomenon. Thus it is easy to forget that efficacy and safety are priorities.¹ In my view, this would be detrimental to any long-term success for CM

Clearly the most important consequence of the “undue” media attention¹ is its potential (I would argue likelihood) to mislead the public and endanger patients. It is not difficult to find instances in which the newspaper columns on CM are misinformed to the extent that serious harm is conceivable.⁷ It is obvious that, at this point, our patience with the media’s approach must run out. I am convinced (and have the data to show) that CM has the potential for both benefit and harm.⁸ Its trivialisation can only minimise its benefits and maximise its potential for harm.

So what are the solutions? It is too easy to demand that the media should behave more responsibly — others have tried achieving this with little effect. Perhaps we should ask what can we do ourselves? Pharmacists are in a unique position. Fifty-two per cent of CM-users do not inform their doctors⁹ and pharmacists are often the only contact that CM users have with conventional health care professionals. This gives pharmacists the opportunity to inform their clients responsibly, eg, based on evidence rather than commercial interests.

Obviously such a strategy requires that pharmacists first acquire sound knowledge. But where from? The Panel provides examples of reliable resources for evidence-based information on CM. Pharmacists should consider these and put themselves in a position where they can advise their customers adequately. I am sure that pharmacists would profit (commercially and otherwise) from such a move, and that it could make a positive contribution to the health of the nation.

Table: Comparing newspaper reporting of CM in the UK and Germany

	UK	Germany
Number of articles on CM during eight days	26	4
Percentage of CM articles with “positive tone”	100	25
Critical:uncritical CM articles	0:100	75:25

References

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Panel: Evidence-based sources of CM information

Websites

- www.nccam.nih.gov
- www.rosenthal.hs.columbia.edu
- www.mdanderson.org
- www.mskcc.org/mskcc/html/11570.cfm

Recent books

- Barnes J, Anderson LA, Phillipson DJ. *Herbal Medicine*. London: Pharmaceutical Press; 2002.
- Fugh-Berman A. *The 5-minute herb & dietary supplement consult*. New York: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins; 2003.
- American Cancer Society. *Guide to complementary and alternative cancer methods*. Atlanta, Georgia: American Cancer Society; 2000.
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Journals

- Focus on Alternative and Complementary Therapies*
- The Journal of Complementary Medicine*

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