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[Return to List of Articles](#)

ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE AND THE FREEDOM TO CHOOSE

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As a rule, we are inclined to feel uncomfortable in a world where, in significant numbers, other people do not share our ways of thinking, our values, and our beliefs about life. Accordingly, we try to change the world (or wish the world would change) in ways that would ease our discomfort. When we do so, we need to be careful that we are motivated by our sincere belief that the world itself will thereby be a better and safer place in general and not merely a more comfortable place for ourselves.

Those of us who self-identify as skeptics are part of a larger population who feel uncomfortable in a world where the beliefs, opinions, decisions and actions of many people do not appear to be based on a rational and unprejudiced consideration of the available evidence. On the other hand, it is evident that stable and healthy societies tend to be those that accept and tolerate a wide range of beliefs and activities amongst the populace, even those that fall into the above category. Hence there is often much debate about when and where lines must be drawn and freedoms curtailed.

It was reported recently (*note 1*) that the father of an 11-year-old girl with leukaemia lost his appeal in the High Court to allow his daughter to receive 'natural therapies' such as homeopathy and ozone gas, rather than conventional chemotherapy and antibody treatment. The father believed that chemotherapy was not the only way to treat his daughter and there were many alternative treatments he wanted to try in order to avoid her suffering chemotherapy side-effects. The Court ruled that there was no evidence that any of these alternative therapies would benefit the child, who would very likely die within weeks if she did not receive the prescribed evidence-based treatment.

Where is the line to be drawn? Some people believe that parents should be free to decide what treatment, if any, their children should be given when they are ill (e.g. rejection of blood transfusion by certain religious groups) or to prevent them becoming ill (e.g. rejection of vaccination). These decisions are often based on lack of information, misinformation and misguided thinking (e.g. the father who refused MMR vaccination for his two children as he didn't want to 'put them at risk'; likewise some people's attitude to COVID vaccination). It's annoying and frustrating to us when people think and act in clearly irrational and irresponsible ways, especially under the influence of others similarly inclined. But there's more to it in the above case: a child's life hangs in the balance. No child should be deprived of potentially life-saving treatment for the wrong reasons; for comparison, we would not allow a parent to send their 6-year-old child alone to the shops across a busy main road.

So how do we decide where to draw the line? I feel that we skeptics can sometimes become too aggressive and over-involved in our campaigns and protestations against irrational and unscientific or pseudoscientific claims and practices. This is my reaction when, for instance, I read accounts of surveys bemoaning the fact that many people still believe in astrology and spiritualism, or the existence of ghosts and extraterrestrial visitors, or the biblical story of creation. I would be happier if this were not so, but I should try not think any the less of people who hold such beliefs and perhaps even celebrate the fact that we live in a society in which such diversity of ideas and is able to flourish.

Dare I say the same about alternative medicine? For sure, it's largely based on magical thinking and has little effect beyond placebo. But the placebo value of any treatment is not to be ignored. Perhaps the proliferation of 'alternative remedies' in our society is telling us that it they do play some kind of beneficial role and we should

ease up a little on our efforts to have them outlawed altogether (if this were possible anyway) which may have unpredictable negative consequences.

My own view is that strictly confining our National Health Service to the administration of conventional, scientifically-based medicine and ‘alternative remedies’ to the private sector might potentiate any hypothetical beneficial role of the latter. For one thing, the person who opts for alternative medicine is taking some responsibility for their treatment, which in itself is not a bad thing (‘These pills the doctor has given me are useless—I’m going to try homeopathy/ acupuncture/ herbal medicine/ etc.’). I’m not *happy* about this, but shouldn’t I ask myself how much my wishing things were different is to do with my need to alleviate *my* discomfort rather than my concern for the suffering of others?

Something that can help me address this question is to consider whether my concern with alternative medicine is in proportion to how I feel about shortcomings and dubious, not to say scandalous, practices in mainstream medicine. Shouldn’t the skeptical community—let alone little me—be spending more time and energy on the latter, rather than the low-hanging, but less consequential fruit offered by alternative therapists? What about the over-prescription of antibiotics, anti-depressants and painkillers (including the ‘opioid crisis’); the egregious practices of pharmaceutical companies; and the questionable reliability and utility of much medical research?

In fact, it is gratifying that there *are* individuals and organisations, well-respected by skeptics, who have risen to this challenge without neglecting the iniquities of quack medicine. The campaigning charity HealthWatch-UK is worthy of mention in this respect. Despite being an organisation of orthodox medical practitioners and allied professionals, they are not shy of questioning and criticising mainstream ideas and procedures.

A glance at their recent Spring 2021 Newsletter (*note 2*) bears this out. The ‘News in Brief’ section contains a wide range of critical commentaries on topics almost exclusive to mainstream practice. There is also a review of evidence for the health benefits of consuming fermented food, with a skeptical conclusion concerning recent interest in their value for COVID-19 patients. A feature on the over-prescribing of antidepressants follows, which informs us that ‘They are prescribed for about 12% of the population in both the UK and the US’ and ‘In England the number of antidepressant prescriptions doubled between 2008 and 2018 despite the fact that the pills are now off patent’. Then we have an article, the contents of which surely justify its title ‘Error and Fraud: The Dark Side of Biomedical Research’. The final contribution is a rejoinder to an existing scientific paper questioning the efficacy of the orthodontic practice of fitting children with braces. (The author defends this with evidence from his own practice). Compare all of this, and much more, with how the Alice-in-Wonderland alternative medical industry conducts itself, whereby everyone wins and all must have prizes—the Dodo verdict’.

So let’s keep insisting that the public remain aware that alternative medicines having no scientific basis and are no better than placebos, and that it is not appropriate that they are funded by our NHS. But let us also be mindful of the much more serious problems with mainstream medicine, such as overprescribing, unnecessary testing and treatment, research fraud and malpractice, and expensive and questionable ancillary procedures—the so-called ‘add-ons’.

Notes

1. <https://tinyurl.com/9jv78sfc>
2. <https://tinyurl.com/3x6r25yw>