

PREFERENCE, REFERRAL PRACTICE AND ACCEPTANCE OF ALTERNATIVE FORMS OF MEDICINE AMONG ALLOPATHIC PRACTITIONERS IN A TERTIARY CARE CENTRE

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Abstract

Objectives and Methods: The market of traditional and complementary medicine is rapidly increasing in developing countries. Preference, referral practice and acceptance of alternative forms of medicine among allopathic practitioners is assessed in this cross sectional study using semi structured questionnaire method. Allopathic doctors (n=258) working in tertiary care setup were included in this study by convenient sampling with prior consent taken. Both google form and hard copy format was made available. Data was entered in XL spread sheet and analysis was done using SPSS version 26.

Results: Among the various alternative system of medicine, yoga was the highest preferred (48.8%) followed by siddha (33.3%), ayurveda (30.6%), homeopathy (22.5%), herbal medicine (20.2%), acupuncture (12.8%) and finally unani with least preference of 2.7%. Combination of allopathy and alternative medicine was preferred by 46.9% whereas 21.3% did not prefer, 30.6% were not sure. Skin problem is the main condition for which doctors refer the patients to complementary medicine. Further the study showed 45.7% of allopathy doctors have accepted the idea of practicing complementary medicine within allopathy hospitals. The results showed 25.2% of doctors feel that allopathy has more side effects, whereas 18.2% of doctors feel that alternative forms of medicine have more side effects.

Conclusion: Practicing Doctors of allopathic medicine do prefer AYUSH systems and complementary medicine and recommend it to their patients too. However, many doctors want evidence to practice complementary medicine as they are not aware of the safety and efficacy of alternative forms of medicine.

Keywords: Allopathic, AYUSH, Doctors, Medical practitioners.

Introduction

India is known for its traditional medicinal systems. AYUSH, (an acronym for Ayurveda, Yoga and Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha and Homeopathy) represents the alternative systems of medicine recognized by the Government of India. The market of traditional medicine is rapidly increasing across the globe(1). WHO, by recognizing the role played by alternative practitioners encourages the promotion of alternative medicine along with primary health care system(1). Alternative medicine is recognized across the world for complementing disease prevention and treatment and promoting health(2,3,4).

Alternative form of medicine are those that are not presently considered to be part of conventional medicine eg: Homeopathy, Siddha, Ayurveda, Unani, Yoga, Acupuncture, Massage therapy, Herbal medicine etc. Alternative medicine is called so when used in place of conventional treatment and Complementary medicine is that when used together with conventional treatment(1).Alternative medicine and complementary medicine are usually not a preference of choice by allopathic practitioners, but still certain number of physicians practice complementary medicine and also advise the same (5,6).

In most of the developing countries there is a strong influence of cultural beliefs on usage of alternative forms of medicine. Though India is the birth place of various alternative forms of medicine, the preference and priority is usually for allopathy form of medicine. Literature on the preference of allopathy doctors towards different forms of alternative medicine is less in India and this research was planned with following objectives:

1. To ascertain the preferences of alternative medicine among allopathic practitioners in a tertiary care hospital.
2. To study the practice of referral of alternative medicine among allopathic practitioners.
3. To find the acceptance of complementary treatment (combination of allopathy and AYUSH) in their practice

Materials and Methods:

Study design and setting: This is a Cross Sectional study conducted in a tertiary care hospital in Kanchipuram.

Study population: Inclusion Criteria: The study population includes all allopathy practitioners including post graduates of both genders working in a private medical college which is also a tertiary health care center. Dentists posted in the department of Dentistry(those who had completed under graduation or post graduation and practicing) were also included in the study. Exclusion Criteria: Under graduate medical students , Interns and doctors who are not willing to give consent to the study.

Sample size and sampling technique: Convenient sampling technique was used and 258 practitioners took part in the study.

Data collection procedure:

Data collection was done using a semi- structured questionnaire which had closed and open ended questions. The questionnaire was validated in consultation with experts in the field. The questionnaire was piloted among 10 doctors and the final questionnaire had total of 30 questions. Open ended questions gave the participant the freedom of expression of thoughts on the particular topic of interest. Both google form and hard copies were made available to the participants. The study purpose was explained to the participants and those willing to participate voluntarily were included in the study. An informed consent was obtained prior to the commencement of the study.

Ethical considerations: The study was presented to the institutional ethical committee and ethical clearance was obtained. (Reference No:06/UG/2019/MMCH&RI)

Data analysis: Data was entered in Excel spreadsheet and analysis was done using SPSS version 26. Descriptive statistics was done and results are discussed below. Comparison of two proportions was done using chi – square test and $p < .05$ was considered statistically significant. The answers got from open ended questions are also presented.

Results of the Study:

Demographics: Total number of participants in the study were 258, of which 51.6% (n=133) were females and 48.4% (n=125) were males, among which 48.8% (n=126) were in the age group of 36 - 50 years and 45% (n=116) to the age group 23 – 35 years and above 50 years of age were 6.2% (n=16). Of the study participants, 41.5% (n= 107) had experience less than a year, 33.3% (n=86) had experience of 1 to 5 years, 10.1% (n=26) had experience of 6 to 10 years, 7.4% (n=19) had experience of 11 to 20 years, 7.8% (n=20) had experience more than 20 years. With regard to specialization 33.7% (n=87) were general practitioners, 11.2% (n= 29) were dentists, 22.9% (n= 59) were medical specialization, and 32.2% (n= 83) were surgical specialization.

Preferences of allopathic practitioners: The results of the study showed 67.4% (n=174) did prefer alternative forms of medicine, while 31.4% (n=81) did not prefer. Of those who preferred alternative form of medicine (n=174), each had their own preferences in one or more forms of alternative medicine. Of the 67.4% (n=174), Yoga was the highest preference of 48.8%, followed by Siddha which has preference by 33.3%, Ayurveda 30.6%, and other forms of alternative medicine such as Homeopathy with 22.5%, Herbal medicine 20.2%, Acupuncture with 12.8%, and finally Unani with the least preference of 2.7%. (Cumulative Percentage will not tally because the participants of the study have selected more than one type of alternative medicine).

The conditions for which most doctors preferred alternative usage was for allergic problems 13.2% (n: 34), followed by COVID19 at 7.8% (n: 20) muscle and joint pain 6.6% (n: 17) and 5.8% (n:15) respectively and others 12.2% (n : 12).

Allopathic doctors who did not prefer/ believe in alternative forms of medicine, stated the following reasons for their non preference(as stated in open ended questions) :

- Not evidence based
- Completely unaware of its safety profile
- Proper practitioners not available
- No official clinical trials available
- Exact mechanism of action with side effects not known.
- Not clear regarding other forms of medicine practice.
- Most of them are quacks

Awareness on safety of alternative forms of medicine: 43.8% (n=113) were aware, 55% (n=142) were not aware and 1.2% (n=3) have not answered.

On seeing the reasons given by the doctors for choosing allopathy as best form of medicine, 64% (n=165) have chosen all of the above given reasons. While 14.3% (n=37) have said allopathy is best for emergency conditions, 12% (n=31) have said yes because it is evidence based, with 3.9% (n=10) said because it gives symptomatic relief, and 2.7% (n=7) has said it cures acute conditions, 3.1% (n=8) have not answered.

Referral of patients to alternative forms of medicine:

The results depicted 34.5% (n=89) doctors referred patients to alternative forms of medicine, 64.3% (n=166) did not refer patients and 1.2% (n=3) did not answer. Most common condition for which doctors referred their patients to complimentary medicine was skin problems 6.6% (n=17). Secondly, bone and joint problems 5.8% (n=15), which is followed by weight loss, then asthma 3.9% (n=10) and obesity 3.1% (n=10). The other problems that they refer for are diabetes, jaundice, kidney stones, migraine.

Table I: Referral of patients to alternative medicine Vs variables

Variable		Referred(%)	Not referred(%)	P Value
Age(years)	23-35	38.8%	59.5%	.434
	36-50	32.5%	66.7%	
	>50	18.8%	81.3%	
Specialization	General practitioner	40.2%	57.5%	.429
	Dentist	37.9%	62.1%	
	Medical specialization	35.6%	64.4%	
	Surgical specialization	26.5%	72.3%	
Gender	Female	35.3%	63.2%	.823
	Male	33.6%	65.6%	
Years of practice	0-1	41.1%	57%	.153
	2-5	25.6%	73.7%	
	6-10	46.2%	53.8%	
	11-20	42.1%	57.9%	
	>20	15%	85%	

Table I shows that there is no association in relation to Referral of patients to alternative medicine and the independent variables age, gender, years of practice and specialization($p < 0.05$ considered significant).

Acceptance: The results on acceptance of combination of allopathy and complementary medicine practice in allopathy hospitals showed that 45.7%(n:118) of doctors have accepted the idea of practicing complementary medicine within the hospital along with allopathy, whereas 52.3%(n: 135) of doctors disagreed and 2% (n=5) did not answer.

To the question of whether combination of allopathy and alternative medicine be useful in treatment practices, almost half of the allopathic practitioners i.e, 46.9% said yes, 30.6% said they did not know.

Combination of allopathy and alternative medicine was thought to be useful by 46.9%(n=121) , not useful by 21.3%(n=55) and 30.6%(n=79) didn't have any idea about the application of combination of allopathy and alternative forms of medicine.

Table II: Acceptance of combination of alternative forms/complimentary medicine in allopathy hospital Vs variables

Variable		accepted (%)	Not accepted (%)	P Value
Age(years)	23-35	43.1%	54.3%	.234
	36-50	51.6%	46.8%	
	>50	18.8%	81.3%	
Specialization	General practitioner	49.4%	49.4%	.371
	Dentist	48.3%	51.7%	
	Medical specialization	39%	55.9%	
	Surgical specialization	45.8%	53%	
Gender	Female	30.1%	68.4%	.792
	Male	32.8%	66.4%	
Years of practice	0-1	43%	55.1%	.291
	2-5	47.7%	48.8%	
	6-10	69.2%	30.8%	
	11-20	47.4%	52.6%	
	>20	20%	80%	

Table II shows that there is no association in relation to acceptance of combination of alternative forms of medicine in allopathy hospital and the independent variables age, gender, years of practice and specialization ($p < .05$ considered significant).

Among allopathy and alternative medicine, 25.2% of allopathic practitioners feel that allopathy has more side effects, 18.2% feel that alternative medicine has more side effects, 27.5% were not willing to comment, 27.1% were not sure, 2% did not answer.

Awareness on Ayushman Bharat:

While looking into the awareness of this scheme Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana , a maximum number of doctors were found to be aware of this with a highest percentage of 73.6(n=190), following a minimum percentage of 24.8%(n=64) of being not aware of it.

When questioned about their acceptance of practicing this scheme in Tamil Nadu, 18.2%(n=47) doctors have said yes , while a majority of 77.1%(n=199) refused, 4.7%(n=12) didn't answer to this question.

Discussion:

Complementary and alternative forms of medicine are practiced all over the world. Combination of traditional and conventional treatment is considered as a holistic approach in treatment of various diseases. Though awareness about availability of traditional systems of medicine AYUSH maybe good among allopathic medical practitioners in India(7,8,9), there is limited literature available on the preferences, referral practices, and perception of allopathic doctors regarding alternative forms of medicine and since practitioners of modern medicines may have to approach treatment strategies with combination of allopathy and AYUSH i.e, complementary medicine, if their patients are interested, it would be useful to know the doctors preferences and practice towards it to make recommendations accordingly based on our study results.

In our study it was observed that 67.4% do prefer alternative forms of medicine, and with regard to preference, Yoga was the highest, followed by Siddha, Ayurveda and then Homeopathy. Unani was the least preferred. While yoga was most preferred among our study participants, another study by Roy V et al(7)reported Homeopathy followed by Ayurveda was most preferred amongst doctors. Singhal S et al(8)reported homeopathy (44.0%) was the most common system used by doctors for themselves, and yoga was the therapy most commonly(60.0%) recommended to patients.

In our study, more than half were not aware of the safety and efficacy of alternative forms of medicine. Around 30% of our study participants did not believe in AYUSH and they stated reasons that it is not evidence based, safety profile not known, improper practitioners, no proper clinical trials, exact mechanism of action with side effects not known. Similar perceptions were found in a study done by Ojha et al(9) to understand doctors' attitude to and awareness of AYUSH therapies for the treatment of diabetes mellitus (DM), majority of doctors in their study(68%) had not recommended AYUSH therapies as an adjunct to modern medicines. Approximately half of the doctors believed that AYUSH therapies posed a safety concern for patients and a large group of doctors thought that the main barrier preventing AYUSH therapies from being integrated into current allopathic management of DM was the lack of strong scientific evidence and clinical trials.

Though 46.9% agreed that combination of allopathy and alternative forms will be useful in treatment of health problems, only around 30% refer their patients to AYUSH. The common problems that they refer their patients is for skin problem followed by bone and joint problems, weight loss, obesity and few other like sleeping disorders and jaundice. Literature shows (10) that complementary medicine is best used in chronic illnesses (8) and our study supports this with the doctors' referral practice for diseases.

It was observed that 45.7% of doctors accept to the idea of practicing complementary medicine within hospital along with allopathy. A mixed response was observed through a systematic review with regard to utilization, preference, perception and characteristics of people that included doctors too in their study who adopted traditional and AYUSH systems of medicine in India(11).

Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (PM- JAY) (12) is a scheme in which, the alternative medical practitioners undergo a 6 months training period in allopathy medicine covering 1350 medical packages including Surgical , Medical and Daycare treatments and can give free treatment for various diseases including COVID19, in all public and impaneled private hospitals in time of need. The 1st batch from this scheme have already completed their training and are now practicing in Mumbai. While looking into the awareness of this scheme , a maximum number of doctors in our study were found to be aware of this with a highest percentage of 73.6%. Our study how ever did not explore into the acceptance of this program.

Conclusion:

Practicing Doctors of allopathic medicine do prefer AYUSH systems and complementary medicine and recommend it to their patients too. However, it was observed doctors want evidence to practice complementary medicine as many are not aware of the safety and efficacy of alternative forms of medicine.

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