

Marginal to Mainstream

Alternative Medicine in America

Millions of Americans are using complementary and alternative medicine and spending billions of dollars, out of pocket, for it. Why? Do the therapies work? Are they safe? Are any covered by insurance? How is the medical profession responding to the growing use of therapies that were only recently thought of as quackery? These are some of the many questions asked and answered in this book. It describes a transformation in the status of alternative medicine within health care. Paving the way toward legitimacy is research currently underway and funded by the National Institutes of Health. This research is proving the safety and efficacy of certain therapies and the harm or inefficacy of others. Although some therapies will remain alternative to conventional medicine, others are becoming complementary, and still others are busting the boundaries and contributing to a new approach to health and healing called integrative medicine.

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by

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-83429-2 — Marginal to Mainstream
 Mary Ruggie
 Frontmatter
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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom
 One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
 477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
 314-321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi - 110025, India
 103 Penang Road, #05-06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521834292

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First published 2004

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data

Ruggie, Mary, 1945-

Alternative medicine in America : from quackery to commonplace / Mary Ruggie.
 p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-521-83429-5 (hbk.) – ISBN 0-521-54222-7 (pbk.)

1. Alternative medicine. 2. Self-care, Health. I. Title.

R733.R84 2004

615.5 – dc21

2003053292

ISBN 978-0-521-83429-2 Hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-54222-7 Paperback

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For John and Andreas, who give my life a special meaning

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Acronyms

AMA	American Medical Association
CAM	Complementary and alternative medicine
FDA	Food and Drug Administration
HMO	Health maintenance organization
MCO	Managed care organization
NCCAM	National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine
NIH	National Institutes of Health
OAM	Office of Alternative Medicine
RCT	Randomized controlled trial
RFA	Request for applications

Preface

A social transformation is taking place in American health care. It started as more and more people (now millions) began to spend out-of-pocket dollars (now billions) on what has come to be called complementary and alternative medicine (CAM). Policymakers in both government and health care began to take notice of this groundswell of interest. Some of them are simply watching and waiting to see what happens next, whereas others are actively supporting change. Most interestingly, growing numbers of physicians have begun to take courses on therapies that stood outside the norms of medicine throughout the 20th century, even though some had been used for millenia. These physicians want to learn more about what their patients are trying to convey to them – how healing is as important to health care as curing. Insurance companies are also hearing the sounds of consumer interest and slowly responding to market demand. For its part, government has done more than listen to people who are using alternative medicine. Congress, the National Institutes of Health, and the White House have each recognized that the government must respond to impending changes in health care by, in this instance, fulfilling its obligation to assess the safety and efficacy of products that heretofore have existed in a totally unregulated private market. Millions of dollars are being devoted to scientific research that is paving the way for further consideration of regulatory measures.

This book is full of questions – what is CAM; why are so many people using it; do they know what they are doing; do the therapies

work; are they safe; are they just placebo; how are physicians, insurers, and government responding to the growth of CAM; and what does all this mean for the future of health care? These are the questions that sparked my interest in pursuing this project and that guided my research.

Although I have been interested in such practices as yoga and meditation for many years, the idea of writing a book on CAM did not occur to me until 1997. My personal interest deepened when I was given access to the many resources available to breast cancer patients – support groups, movement classes, relaxation techniques, information on nutrition and personal care, and much more. My professional interest was piqued when later that same year I attended a faculty seminar at Columbia University, where I was then teaching. Presenting the topic of discussion were two representatives: one from a clinic offering selected alternative therapies to cardiac patients, and another from an insurance company offering (limited) coverage for alternative therapy services and practitioners. Attendance at the seminar was unusually high, and so was the temperature of some of the participants. Amazed and baffled by the hostility expressed by the biomedical scientists in particular, I sat back and put on my sociologist's hat. Before me the basis for a research project was unfolding.

As I learned more about the growth of CAM and the debates about the relationship between CAM and science and medicine and health care, this book took shape. At its core is the transformation that is occurring in the status of alternative medicine – from a broad and amorphous set of practices that were once thought of as quackery (not too long ago, as the seminar at Columbia indicated) to a specialized and specified set of practices that are beginning to enjoy qualified legitimacy in the field of health and healing. The role of the different actors – users, physicians, researchers, insurers, and government – involved in this process of transformation structures the chapters in this book.

Along the way, I have met many remarkable people. It's been fascinating to watch the work of some (and on occasion experience it) and hear about the endeavors of others. I cannot thank them all by name because I promised confidentiality. However, I am grateful and deeply indebted to the researchers who took time out of their overfilled days to talk with me. I hope this book makes a small contribution to acknowledge and perhaps further their efforts.

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There are others whom I can name, however. When I was still a novice in the world of CAM, Janet Mindes opened her file cabinets and out flowed a wealth of information, contacts, and inspiration. David Eisenberg welcomed me into the fold, invited me to conferences, and introduced me to professionals I could never have met on my own. Michael Cohen became a dear colleague and friend, and in both capacities read an early draft of this book. Pat Oden also read a draft; he and Madeline Oden became my “intelligent laypersons.” Larry Brown read the final manuscript with enormous care and insight; he’s a marvel to everyone who knows him. An anonymous reviewer for Cambridge University Press offered very helpful comments. This time Andreas, my son, contributed his ideas on my ideas – what a joy! And, of course, where would I be without my husband, John, without his support, encouragement, patience, and love? As always, this book is dedicated to John and Andreas.