

# Medical Report

BY SARAH HENRY



Acupuncture can provide great stress relief—if you pick a competent practitioner.

growing—and some treatments are even reimbursed by insurers—consumers can have a tough time getting reliable information about alternative practitioners. Training, philosophies and practices vary widely among disciplines as well as among individuals. Regulation is spotty: In some states anyone can hang out a shingle and call herself a holistic healer.

As with conventional doctors, however, there are some basic guidelines for making wise choices. Whether you're seeking help from a chiropractor for back pain, acupuncture treatment to recover from a flu more quickly or general medical care from a preventive and herbal-medicine specialist like a naturopath, here's what experts in the fields of both alternative and mainstream medicine say to look for:

## Shopping for an alternative doctor

How to separate the hype from the help

**O**NA OKRAGLY HAD learned to live with an on-again, off-again backache. She dutifully performed the daily stretching exercises her primary care doctor recommended, even though they didn't always ease her pain. Then one morning last spring she woke up in agony. "I could barely get out of bed," Okragly says. Convinced her doctor had run out of remedies, she called a friend whose back pain had subsided after she began seeing a chiropractor. "My friend was a little hesitant to make a recommendation," recalls Okragly. "I should have picked up on that."

But Okragly was in a hurry to get help. At the end of a free consultation, the chiropractor told Okragly that he'd need to adjust her back three times a week for two months, and then weekly for another month or more. At more than \$40 a visit (none of it covered by her insurance), that amounted to a major expense.

So she asked if he was willing to see her less often, at least until she felt confident that the treatment was doing some good. The answer was no. "He had a formula and he wasn't going to budge," she says. "I felt

he wasn't taking into account the way my body might respond." The final straw? He offered a discount if she'd pay upfront for the entire treatment plan. Turned off by his assembly-line approach, Okragly decided to find a chiropractor who would treat her as an individual. "I should have pushed my friend to tell me why she was uncomfortable with this guy," says the 21-year-old Santa Cruz, California, anthropology student. "I was in bad shape and could have saved some time."

An estimated one in three Americans turns to some form of unconventional medical treatment for pain relief, basic health care or to ease the symptoms of chronic conditions (from insomnia and allergies to chronic pain) that don't respond to conventional drugs or surgery. While the demand for alternative care is

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### Use your regular doctor as a resource

In a 1993 study published in *The New England Journal of Medicine*, David Eisenberg, M.D., director of the Center for Alternative Medicine Research at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston, found that 70 percent of patients who tried alternative therapies never told their physicians. But sounding out your doctor *should* be your first move, he says. Your primary care doctor may be able to help you weigh the risks and benefits of treating your problem with a particular technique, give you a list of questions to bring to a practitioner or even refer you directly to a specialist.

Stephanie Wilson, a New York City writer, consulted her family doctor first for her debilitating tension headaches. Wilson's doctor recommended an acupuncturist because results were likely to be quicker than with physical therapy—a factor her busy schedule demanded. The three kept in touch through conference calls to see how the treatment was working. Wilson says, "I felt comforted that my doctor had experience with both the treatment and the practitioner. There was never a case of one fighting with the other over what was the best therapy for me."

A small but growing number of M.D.'s offer a mix (Continued)

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(Continued) of Western and alternative therapies in one practice. "That's a good place for newcomers to start," says Richard Shames, M.D., a Mill Valley, California, general practitioner who specializes in herbal medicine and nutrition. "There is a bewildering array of alternative techniques and schools of thought, and a well-rounded generalist can help you sort them out." The American Holistic Medical Association maintains a national directory of physicians who offer so-called complementary or integrated care: For a copy, send \$5 to AHMA, 6728 Old McLean Village Dr., McLean VA 22101.

## Research your condition using credible sources

There's no shortage of information about alternative medicine out there. The problem: Much of it is backed by advocates with a financial or philosophical interest in hawking a particular treatment. Few alternative therapies have been proven safe and effective in rigorous scientific trials, with the notable exceptions, says Dr. Eisenberg, of chiropractic for acute lower-back pain, acupuncture for nausea, and relaxation techniques for insomnia and chronic pain.

More research is in the pipeline, however, and learning what scientists deem promising can help you match a technique to your problem. The Office of Alternative Medicine (OAM) at the National Institutes of Health has funded 10 specialty medical centers to investigate a variety of alternative treatments, including acupuncture for depression and attention deficit disorder; hypnosis for chronic pain; biofeedback for diabetes; yoga for obsessive-compulsive disorder; and visualization therapy for cancer patients. For general information on alternative therapies and ongoing OAM research, write the OAM at P.O. Box 8218, Silver Springs MD 20907-8218, or visit its Web site at [altmed.od.nih.gov](http://altmed.od.nih.gov).

Another good source: Dr. Andrew Weil's Web site ([www.drweil.com](http://www.drweil.com)). Weil, a Harvard-trained M.D. and best-selling author (*8 Weeks to Optimum Health*, Knopf), offers a searchable data-

base comparing traditional medical treatments with a variety of less mainstream remedies. Type in *tension headache*, for instance, and the site identifies some common causes and steers you to lifestyle changes, biofeedback, shiatsu massage and osteopathic manipulation (which Dr. Weil recommends be performed by doctors trained in craniosacral technique, not by chiropractors). Dr. Weil's site also includes advice on finding a qualified alternative practitioner near you.

## Ask about credentials

Oxford Health Plans, a managed-care company with 1.7 million members in the Northeast, Florida and Illinois, recently set an example for consumers by becoming the first health plan to develop criteria that acupuncturists, chiropractors, naturopaths, registered dietitians, nutritionists, massage therapists and yoga instructors must meet to join its new alternative-medicine network.

What they look for: practitioners who hold state licenses, have at least two years of practical experience, and have earned an advanced degree in their field from an accredited school.

State licensing usually dictates what a practitioner can call herself and what she can legally do. All 50

states license chiropractors, though each sets its own standards for training. Naturopathic physicians (N.D.'s) are not so well-regulated: In the 11 states that do offer licensing, an N.D. will have a four-year postgraduate degree and will be trained in the diagnosis and treatment of routine ailments. All naturopaths can prescribe herbal medications and, if state law permits, can prescribe conventional medicine and perform minor surgery, like any primary care physician. In states that don't license these caregivers, their role is more limited—and the N.D. after their names may not mean much. "In the unlicensed states, just about anybody can call themselves a naturopath, so find out exactly what their training is," says Michelle Pouliot, a naturopathic physician in Torrington, Connecticut, and an Oxford advisory-board member. "They may have 20 years' experience or a degree from a mail-order course."

"It's also a plus if the practitioner is a faculty member of a school (Continued)

"It's a plus if the practitioner is on a school faculty or affiliated with a hospital, since that means he went through another filter system."

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(Continued) or affiliated with a hospital," says Darien Lamb, an acupuncturist and registered nurse in New Rochelle, New York, "since that means they've had to go through another filter system."

### Interview the practitioner

"I encourage people to interview me, either over the phone or in person," says Joan Fallon, a chiropractor in New Rochelle, New York, and an Oxford advisory-board member. "They should find out what I do and how I work as well as what my credentials and training are."

Other questions to ask, says Dr. Eisenberg: Have you worked with other patients who have my problem, and if so, could I speak to one of them? What are the limitations of the therapy? Are there any side effects? How many treatments will it take? How much will it cost? Are you willing to bill my insurer?

It's smart to get a sense of the practitioner's view of mainstream medicine. Your practitioner should be willing to talk to your primary care doctor about your treatment and know whom to refer

you to if you need specialty care, says Pouliot. "I recently examined a patient with vaguely defined back pain who came to me for an alternative treatment," says Dr. Shames. "After I listened to what he had to say, I decided that he needed a referral to a good neurologist. It turned out he had a spinal-cord tumor."

### Inspect their digs

Initial impressions count: Look for a clean and unchaotic office. The practitioner's credentials should be on prominent display. Educational handouts are a good sign. "A licensed naturopath's practice should look like a fairly typical medical office," says Pouliot. "You should see stethoscopes, blood pressure cuffs, lab supplies and gynecological instruments."

Tools of the trade aside, many alternative health practitioners strive for an environment that's less clinical than your average family practice. Home offices aren't uncommon, and they present no unique disadvantages; however, your comfort level is key.

"I've had good experiences with people who do acupuncture out of their homes," says one 39-year-old who uses

the treatment to keep her chronic bladder infections under control. "But I drew the line at an acupuncturist who was running a real estate business out of the same office. I could hear her making deals on the phone while I was on the table. Health care clearly wasn't her first priority."

### Watch for red flags

A reputable alternative healer won't try to force you to quit seeing your regular physician or urge you to stop taking prescription medicine. "An alternative practitioner might suggest talking with your doctor about lowering your medication dosages, but if the practitioner can't prescribe a drug, he can't take it away," says acupuncturist Lamb.

Other danger signs to watch for include sweeping, overblown or unsupported claims about "cures." Any practitioner who boasts that his therapy is the *only* one that can help you should be avoided.

"It's like religion," says Jennifer Sloane, 35, an attorney who has tried acupuncture and chiropractic to manage stress and PMS. "There's more than one way to pray."

For help locating a well-trained practitioner in one of the three most common specialties, try these resources:

■ **Acupuncturists** can be credentialed by the National Certification Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine and/or licensed by the state. (Some states grant licenses only to physicians or chiropractors.) A Doctor of Oriental Medicine (D.O.M.) has completed more than the nominal three to four years of study required for certification and has been trained in massage and herbal medicine as well as acupuncture. The American Academy of Medical Acupuncture (800-521-2262) makes referrals to its physician members; the American Association of Oriental Medicine (610-266-1433) refers to 950 certified acupuncturists.

■ **Chiropractors** The American Chiropractic Association (800-986-4636) provides referrals to 21,500 state-licensed members who have attended an accredited chiropractic school.

■ **Naturopaths** Only 11 states license N.D.'s. For a directory of highly trained naturopathic physicians from accredited colleges, send \$5 to the American Association of Naturopathic Physicians, 601 Valley St., Suite 105, Seattle WA 98109.

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