

Patient Satisfaction Concerning CAM Discussions with Primary Care Providers

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With the use of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) growing in the United States and few primary care providers (PCPs) inquiring about their patients' CAM usage, patients may be left feeling unsatisfied with their health care. The purpose of this study was to determine the satisfaction of people regarding CAM discussions with their PCP. This study used a descriptive survey design. Data was collected by a questionnaire that was distributed to a convenience sample of 113 participants at public venues. Participants were 18 years of age or older and were able to read and write in English. The sample ranged in age from 20 to 90 years with most being Caucasian (81%) and female (67%). Results showed that 41 participants (36%) used CAM. Twenty-four participants (21%) were asked about their use of CAM by their PCP and 27 participants (24%) stated that they were satisfied with their discussions of CAM with their PCPs. These findings indicated that there were few providers discussing CAM with their patients, despite how many people would like to talk about CAM. Providers may want to become more knowledgeable about CAM therapies so that they can discuss these options and become more sensitive to the needs of their patients.

Introduction

Complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) has been growing in popularity for the past 20 years.⁸ CAM encompasses many different kinds of medicines and therapies including massage, aromatherapy, acupuncture and herbal remedies, among others.² Primary health care providers today are undereducated on CAM therapies, frequently underestimating patient use of CAM; they have not matched the demand at which the population has demonstrated interest.¹² In one study, physicians believed that only 4% of their patients were practicing CAM when the actual percentage was 37%.⁴ Another study found that 58% of physicians always or often asked their patients about CAM usage.⁹ This left about half of physicians failing to ask their patients about CAM usage, which ultimately led to the question of whether primary health care providers were asking patients the appropriate questions regarding CAM and discussing CAM options.²

Patients turn to CAM for several reasons. The most frequent reason is dissatisfaction with the results of conventional medicine, especially in chronic illness.¹⁰ Other reasons include patients' desire for empowerment and control over their health and also the feeling that CAM is a more holistic way of health.⁶ Lack of provider knowledge of CAM may lead to increasing patient dissatisfaction with the health care system, resulting from patients feeling as if they do not have control over their healthcare. Due to possible CAM therapy interactions with allopathic medications, this lack of communication regarding CAM usage between patient and health care provider can be potentially harmful.¹⁰ This study addressed the satisfaction of the general patient population concerning CAM discussions between

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patients and their primary health care providers. This information was valuable to collect because it is important that health care providers are aware of the growing interest in CAM while caring for their patients in a manner that will enhance both patient satisfaction and health.

Review of Literature

Complementary and Alternative Medicine

The use of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) amongst the population of the United States has significantly increased within the past 20 years.⁸ CAM growth is paralleling the growth of preventative medicine and measures such as smoking cessation and health education, thus drifting away from conventional drugs and major surgeries.³ In a study from 2003, more than one-third of Americans reported participation in CAM therapies and consumption of over \$10 billion annually on CAM products and treatments.⁹ Reasons why patients chose CAM over allopathic medicine included dissatisfaction with allopathic medicine and the desire to be more involved and holistic in their own health.¹² Despite the growth of CAM usage, however, only about 50% of physicians inquired about the use of CAM amongst their patients.⁹ It is evident that there is a discrepancy between what health care providers are discussing with their patients and what patients are interested in, such as CAM. Patients may be left feeling unsatisfied with the primary care being provided and their overall health.

General Population (Patients) and CAM

The use of CAM in the United States has been steadily growing with 30% to 50% of the American people using complementary medicines or therapies.^{1,13} Other studies have shown that some populations, especially cancer populations, were more likely to use CAM therapies, increasing the range from 30% to 83%.² Data from the 2002 National Health Interview Survey (NHIS) of 17,295 women found about 40% CAM usage amongst women, with biological and mind-based therapies most commonly used. Asian women and women of “Other” races reported the highest CAM usage, followed by White, Hispanic, and Black individuals.¹¹

A United States survey, analyzed by Meeker,¹⁴ found that more Americans were making visits to CAM providers than to primary care physicians. According to a systematic review conducted by Bishop et al.,⁵ the growth of CAM usage was attributed to four main reasons: beliefs related to control and participation over health and well-being,

perceptions of illness and psychological factors affecting health, beliefs concerning holistic and natural treatments and general philosophies of life (such as a belief that CAM was a part of culture or religion). In the review, 10 of 13 studies showed significant associations with persons using CAM to become more involved with their healthcare and 17 of 22 studies positively linked the relationship between CAM usage and users’ beliefs that psychological factors affected health. However, these studies mostly examined populations with patients having cancer or human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). An exception was noted in one study of patients diagnosed with advanced stages of cancer that were found to have a lower desire to self-treat with CAM therapies.⁵

There are other reasons people may use CAM therapies in addition to those previously discussed. A study in England explored the fact that some people used CAM therapy for enjoyment, or in terms of the article, as “treats.”⁶ Some people used therapies such as massage, aromatherapy and reflexology for pampering and relaxation instead of preventing, relieving or curing a specific ailment. This is important to note in order to initiate effective communication between patients and providers and their reasons for CAM usage.

Age and perceived health status are factors that can affect whether an individual is more likely to use CAM therapies. A study conducted by Cartwright⁷ found that individuals over the age of 60 used alternative therapies to help them cope with the effects of ill-health and health related anxiety. Older adults were more at risk to suffer from chronic pain and, as a result, were more likely to use CAM therapies.¹⁰ Older persons also felt more empowered about their health when using CAM and were dissatisfied with conventional medicines.⁷ According to a cross-sectional study, those individuals that had a low self-perceived health status, regardless of socioeconomic status, were considerably more likely to use CAM therapies.¹⁹

Although safety is an obvious concern regarding CAM therapies and interactions between CAM and conventional medicines, there were no studies that proved CAM to be harmful. In fact, a prospective study performed on a sample of 1,319 active duty United States Navy and Marine Corps personnel found a small reduction in the overall risk of hospitalization associated with self-administration of two or more CAM therapies. This may be strongly related to the individual role and interest in personal health. In contrast, use of practitioner-assisted CAM was not associated with a protective effect.¹⁷ It is important to note that those that do use practitioner-assisted CAM require more intense therapy, which puts that group at a higher risk for hospitalization.

It is essential for health care providers and especially primary care physicians to be knowledgeable about why people choose to use CAM and which populations are more likely to use CAM therapies. By ensuring that health care providers know this information, discussions regarding complementary and alternative therapies can take place to enhance the mental and physical well being of patients, especially those with chronic pain, low self-perceived health and patients with cancer. Recognizing why people depend on alternative therapy is important in order to determine how health care providers can be more helpful to their patients.

Primary Care Providers and CAM

As healthcare providers it is important to understand the medical trends and interests that the general patient population is following in order to better satisfy patient healthcare needs. Due to the increased growth of CAM usage, numerous studies have been conducted to determine the perceptions of primary care providers (PCPs) regarding CAM and their attitudes of providing CAM therapies to their patients. According to a Turkish study involving 521 physicians, virtually all participating physicians had never received CAM education, but nearly 75% reported they were interested in learning more about alternative medicines¹⁵. Within the same study, 65% of the physicians felt neutral towards CAM usage amongst patients, whereas 15% felt bothered and 28% felt satisfied. The majority of physicians that held a neutral position on patient use of CAM may be attributed to the little knowledge or experience that physicians had with CAM.

Despite the growth of CAM usage, Giveon et al.⁹ found that only 25% of 150 primary care physicians had some training in CAM. This suggested that there was a large discrepancy between the number of people using CAM and what health care providers knew about CAM. This knowledge deficit regarding CAM therapies was evident in an Israeli study that found that approximately 70% of PCPs claimed that they had little or no knowledge about what were herbal remedies.⁹ This lack of knowledge regarding CAM is unfortunate since the use of complementary therapy is growing quickly throughout the nation.

According to a qualitative study, three main themes determined whether communication about CAM took place between patients and their providers. These included the clinician's acceptance and nonjudgmental views about CAM, initiations of communication and safety and efficacy concerns about CAM usage with their patients.¹⁷ This study also found that most patients who were using CAM expected their provider to initiate the discussion but did not expect

their providers to be experts on the therapy they were using.

Similar to users of CAM, there are particular factors and characteristics that may influence physicians' knowledge and favorable view on patients' use of complementary medicines. Physicians that were more likely to favor and endorse CAM therapies tended to be younger practitioners who placed a higher value on holistic approaches in medicine¹. PCPs were also more likely to refer their clients to alternative therapy if they practiced CAM themselves.⁹ Studies have shown that 29% to 31% of primary health care providers practiced some sort of complementary and alternative therapies.^{9,15} Likewise, those physicians who had observed the benefits of CAM therapy were more prone to refer patients to CAM⁴. On the other hand, those physicians that had less favorable attitudes towards CAM tended to be older, doubtful of CAM effectiveness and perceived CAM as having negative effects.⁸

Many of the studies evaluating the attitudes and perceptions of primary care physicians have been international research studies. There has been little research conducted in the United States regarding the usage and perception of CAM, despite the fact that CAM is growing in use in the nation.

Patients, Primary Care Providers and CAM

It is important for patients to communicate the use of CAM therapies with their primary health care provider in order to facilitate discussions regarding CAM. Some problems that could result from lack of communication or miscommunication could be adverse interactions between conventional and unconventional medicines,¹⁰ According to Giveon et al.,⁹ only 58% of the 150 primary care physicians claimed that they had always or often asked their patients about the use of CAM therapies. This left less than half of the physicians having not discussed or communicated CAM usage with their patients. In another study, with a sample size of 783 physicians, 10% had a patient request for a CAM referral; only 50% of physicians complied with the request.⁴ It is significant to note that even when patients directly addressed their interest in CAM therapy, only half of physicians complied with the requests of their patients. This study also showed that physicians were more likely to comply with requests of some CAM therapies such as massage, hypnotherapy and relaxation over therapies such as homeopathy and herbal medicines. Some populations, such as patients with cancer, expected their physicians to discuss and refer them to CAM therapies.²

The lack of primary care providers' inquiry and knowledge regarding CAM may leave patients unsatisfied with their health care and ultimately decrease patients' optimal

mental and physical health. It may also lead them to CAM therapy usage without informing their PCP. This highlights the importance of recognizing patient satisfaction and providing for their health care needs. The purpose of this study was to determine the satisfaction of the general patient population regarding CAM discussions with their PCPs.

Methods

The following two research questions were studied: (1) Are clients satisfied with the CAM therapy discussions they have had with their primary healthcare provider? (2) How many patients are discussing CAM therapies with their PCPs?

Design

This study used a descriptive survey design.

Sample

A convenience sample was used. Participants were required to be 18 years or older and able to read and write in English. The desired sample was 200 participants.

Instruments

The survey instrument was designed by the investigator and consisted of 18 questions that assessed the satisfaction of participants in regards to CAM discussions with their primary healthcare provider. Participants were asked how often they visited their PCP and whether they would like to discuss more about CAM with their provider. Along with the CAM satisfaction survey, participants were asked to complete a demographic data sheet containing questions regarding age, gender and ethnicity. Background literature regarding CAM was used to develop the survey questions. Content validity was established with review by a doctorally prepared nurse with experience in CAM.

Human Subjects

This study received exempt review by the social and behavioral sciences institutional review board.

Procedure

Participants were recruited at public venues (i.e. libraries, grocery stores and college campuses) through voluntary participation. The investigator personally recruited subjects. Subjects were asked to participate in a study con-

cerning the satisfaction of their discussions of CAM with their primary health care providers. Participants were given a buckeye necklace as an incentive for participating in the survey.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics, such as mean, medians and percentages, were used to analyze the data.

Results

The sample consisted of 113 adults, aged 20 to 90, with a mean age of 53 years (S.D. = 15). Thirty participants were male (27%), 76 participants female (68%) and seven participants (6%) did not respond. The majority of the participants were Caucasian (81%), with 5% identifying as American Indian, 4% as African American and 2% as Asian. Eight participants (7%) did not provide a response on their ethnicity.

Twenty-four participants (21%) reported that their PCP asked them about their CAM usage, 85 participants (75%) indicated that they were not asked, three were unsure and one gave no response. Of the 24 that indicated that they had discussed CAM therapies, 58% reported that they were satisfied with their discussions. Of the 85 participants that were not asked about their CAM usage, only 15% reported that they were satisfied. From the overall sample, 27 participants (24%) indicated that they were satisfied with their discussions about CAM with their PCP. Some who reported that they were satisfied with their CAM discussions included those who did not participate in CAM discussions.

Participants who were satisfied or unsure with their CAM discussions were asked to rate their satisfaction on a scale from zero to 10 and the frequency of the ratings were recorded (Figure 1). Most people who discussed CAM with their provider rated their satisfaction as a five out of 10 or higher. The second most reported satisfaction score was 10 out of 10.

Results showed that 41 participants (36%) used CAM therapies. Participants most frequently used massage therapy (28%), chiropractics (13%) and herbal medicines (13%). Participants were able to report their usage of multiple therapies. Figure 2 illustrates participants' usage of specific CAM therapies. Most participants that used CAM reported that they participated in therapy either every day (10%), monthly (9%) or less than once a month (8%). Of the 41 participants that indicated their use of CAM, all reported that they found CAM therapies beneficial.

Because this study was based on the discussions between patients and their PCP, participants were asked

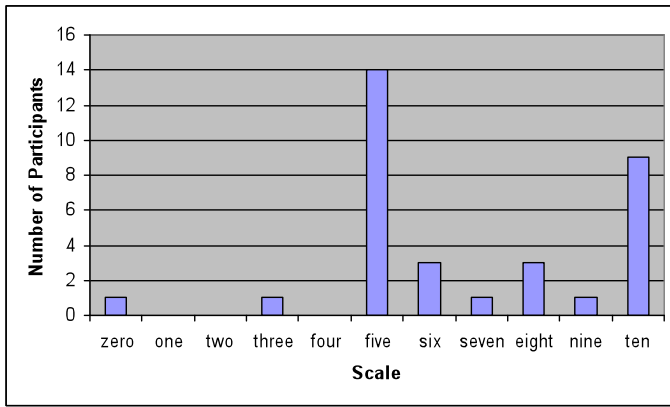


Figure 1. Satisfaction Scale

whether they regularly visited a PCP and 109 (97%) responded yes. Of these participants, 52% indicated that they visited their provider two to three times a year, 31% saw their provider once a year and 13% saw their provider four or more times annually.

Forty-five participants (40%) indicated that they would like to learn more about CAM, 31% indicated that they would not and 27% were not sure. Fifty-seven participants (50%) indicated that they would like their PCP to discuss CAM options with them, 26% indicated that they would not like to discuss CAM and 20% were not sure. Sixty percent of the sample indicated that they would be more inclined to use CAM if their provider recommended it. Ninety participants (80%) indicated that their provider had never referred them to CAM therapies. Of the 16 participants who were referred to CAM therapies by their provider, 12 participants (75%) followed or used the referral. There were no significant differences between men and women regarding their use of CAM, whether their provider asked about CAM use or their satisfaction with their discussions.

Discussion

This study indicated a low level of satisfaction in the general population concerning their CAM discussions with their providers. Those participants who were asked about their use of CAM therapies were more likely to be satisfied with their discussions with their PCP as opposed to those who were not asked about their CAM usage. These findings indicated that there were few providers discussing CAM with their patients, despite how people would like to talk about CAM. These findings were also consistent with Shelly et al.,¹⁶ who found that people expected their providers to initiate conversations regarding CAM therapies.

In this study, 36% of the participants reported use of CAM therapies, which was consistent with the literature.^{1,13} There was, however, a discrepancy in how many physicians asked their patients about their use of CAM. A previ-

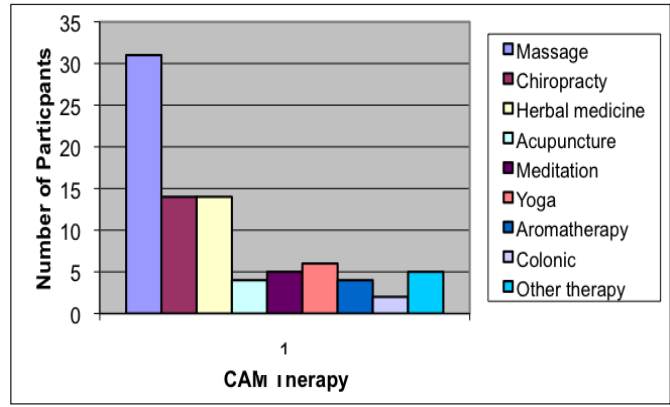


Figure 2. CAM Therapy Usage

ous study, conducted by Giveon et al.,⁹ reported that 58% of physicians addressed their patients about CAM usage. This study found that the general population reported that only 21% of physicians inquired about their CAM usage. It is plausible that physicians reported a higher rate of CAM inquiry with patients whereas patients reported a lower rate of CAM inquiry from their providers. In this study, three of the 113 participants were unsure if asked about their CAM usage by their provider. This may be due to the participant's lack of knowledge of what CAM therapies encompassed or if they had forgotten because it was of little importance to them.

The satisfaction scale (Figure 1) displays the distribution of participants who rated their satisfaction of their CAM discussions on a scale from zero to ten. The extreme bimodal distribution of the scale can not be explained, although it can be determined that those participants that were asked about their CAM usage were mostly neutral or very satisfied about their discussions.

Limitations

A limitation of this study is that it used a convenience sample, so the results could not be generalized. Despite how the sample was diverse in age, it was not diverse in racial identity. The racial distribution was not reflective of the Columbus, Ohio population.

Nursing Implications

Although this study focused on PCPs, nurses can also impact patients' healthcare experience by becoming aware of the health trends of the general population. Nurses, and especially nurse practitioners, can encourage patients to discuss the use of CAM with their providers. They can also suggest the use of CAM to providers and patients to allow for a more holistic treatment approach.

Conclusion

This study was conducted to determine the satisfaction of the general population about their CAM discussions with their providers. This study also examined how many people were actually discussing CAM therapies with their providers. Findings suggested that those that were asked about

CAM usage were more satisfied with their discussions than with those who were not. Only one fifth of the sample reported that they discussed CAM with their providers. Due to the results of this study, healthcare providers may want to become more knowledgeable about CAM therapies so that they can discuss these options with their patients and become more sensitive and holistic to their needs.

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