
Perspectives on Complementary and Alternative Health Care

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Robert Shearer and Joan Simpson,
Health Systems Division, Health Canada
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INTRODUCTION

Canadians are demonstrating an interest in the use of a broad range of health care approaches that, until recently, were considered to be "outside" of conventional health care in North America. Approaches such as naturopathy, herbal remedies, acupuncture and chiropractic—to name a few—are being sought out by millions of Canadians.

The field of complementary and alternative health care (CAHC) brings with it complex issues and questions. How fixed are the boundaries between complementary and alternative medicine and mainstream medicine? Isn't a holistic view of health incorporating prevention and health promotion common to both? Is an approach "alternative" when it is practised by licensed health care practitioners within their scope of practice? Why are some CAHC approaches recognized and regulated in some provincial and territorial jurisdictions, and not in others? What are the ethical issues that accompany the use of CAHC? What are the issues surrounding recognition, licensing and regulation of CAHC practitioners? What processes might be used to coordinate integration of complementary and alternative health care with conventional or mainstream health care?

The use of complementary and alternative health care can be seen as an evolving area with significant implications for health care delivery in Canada. The growing popularity and increased demand for CAHC is evident. It is also clear that Canadians are going ahead and utilizing complementary and alternative health approaches with or without the involvement of mainstream health care providers, or any practitioners.

In mid-1998, the Health Systems Division (then part of the Health Promotion and Programs Branch of Health Canada) began to explore the current and potential impact on Canada's health care system

from the use of complementary and alternative health care approaches. Within a population health approach, the Division considered the potential role of complementary and alternative health care in the context of health promotion, disease prevention, and the management of health and health conditions across all life stages. Subsequent work was directed at better understanding the policy dimensions of complementary and alternative health care; these include education and training, regulatory issues, consumer utilization, accessibility, information and informed choice.

In 1999, through the Population Health Fund, and the Canadian Strategy for HIV/AIDS, a project was undertaken by York University Centre for Health Studies. This project report, entitled *Complementary and Alternative Health Practices and Therapies: A Canadian Overview*, was completed in fall 1999, providing an important Canadian anchor for attention to this area. This report is available on the York University website at : www.yorku.ca/research/ychs

Also in 1999, the Advisory Group on Complementary and Alternative Health Care was formed to assist in identifying key health system issues related to complementary and alternative health care and suggest strategic areas for future attention. This group has been playing an ongoing advisory role in this respect, with a current focus on education issues for all health practitioners, CAHC and mainstream, and health human resource issues across the sector.

Among the activities undertaken by the Health Systems Division from January 2000 to March 2001 was to commission discussion papers on a variety of aspects of complementary and alternative health care to assist in a greater understanding of the issues,

using the Canadian Overview report and the Advisory Group contribution as a launching point. The papers in this collection are the outcome of the work done between April 2000 and March 2001.

In July 2000, the Health Systems Division became part of the Health Policy and Communications Branch of Health Canada, providing an opportunity for greater focus on policy issues related to the present and future impact of complementary and alternative health care on health care systems.

Defining Complementary and Alternative Health Care by Rona Achilles is a review of issues related to defining complementary and alternative health care and delineating the boundaries between CAHC and mainstream medicine. Included are a review and analysis of current definitions, classifications systems and proposed CAHC criteria, as well as attention to health system functions and definition. [completed April 2000]

Taking Stock: Policy Dimensions Associated with Complementary and Alternative Health Care by Theodore de Bruyn is a synthesis of a broad range of information available on CAHC, based on key Canadian and international documents, which also identifies policy implications raised. Areas covered include: concepts and categories, consumer utilization, integration, information, regulation, education, coverage, and research. [completed March 2000]

Towards an Integrative Health System is a discussion paper prepared by the Advisory Group on Complementary and Alternative Health Care for the purpose of examining implications of growth in the use of CAHC therapies and practices, in preparation for describing and initiating discussion on a new model that could integrate conventional and complementary and alternative approaches. [completed July 2000]

The Advisory Group also prepared a paper titled *The need for guidelines: ethical issues in the use of complementary and alternative health care in Canada*.

A summary version is included in this collection, with the assistance of Sally Thorne, one of the Advisory Group members. [completed January 2000]

In November 2000, Health Canada hosted an *Invitational Seminar on Information and Informed Choice in the Use of Complementary and Alternative Health Care*, which brought together representatives of health care professions, national voluntary organizations, national complementary and alternative professional associations and government. The result was a lively and productive discussion of information issues and related policy dimensions; the report of that seminar is part of this collection.

Policy considerations for the regulation of CAHC practitioners have been described in *The Regulation of Complementary and Alternative Health Care Practitioners*, by James Casey and Frances Picherack. The paper includes a description of the overall regulatory environment, identifies approaches to regulating health professions in Canada, and discusses the comparative values of different methodologies. [completed December 2000]

Finally, *Combining Conventional, Complementary and Alternative Health Care: a Vision of Integration*, by Douglas Tartaryn and Marja Verhoef, identifies emerging themes in health care delivery that are relevant to integrated health care. The authors present a vision of how trends and themes complement and could converge into an integrated health care system, and discuss barriers and potential solutions. [completed March 2001]

The Health Systems Division is pleased to present this collection of seven papers. Each of these papers relates to the others; each is important on its own as an integral part of the examination of complementary and alternative health care and its role in health care in Canada today.