Postmodernism and the World of Alternative Medicine

“I will keep them from harm and injustice. I will neither give a deadly drug to anybody who asked for it, nor will I make a suggestion to this effect.”

–The classical version of the Hippocratic Oath

Over the course of thousands of years, physicians and doctors have sworn to abide by the guidelines presented in the Hippocratic Oath. This document was composed in ancient times for noble reasons: to define the job and ethical procedures of a healthcare practitioner. It is now 2011. In a culture and era as advanced as ours, we should surely find better, faster, more effective ways to keep patients “from harm and injustice.” But do we? Maybe not: postmodern thought in the form of alternative medicine is taking a hold on society. As a result, the value of personal experience and so-called “alternative medicine” is being elevated over scientifically tested practices, and patients are being endangered through ignorance and fraud.

What exactly is alternative medicine? Yoga, homeopathy, different collections of herbal remedies, and Ayurveda are just a few examples. There are a multitude of practices, but all have one thing in common: they are methods that are used to treat illnesses or improve quality of life, but have not been generally proven by science and the test of time to produce positive results. In other words, they sometimes work, sometimes fail, and are for the most part rejected by trained conventional medical personnel as a substitute for science-based medicine or for a primary remedy for disease.
The origins of various types of alternative medicine differ from the history of conventional medicine. While science-based medical practices are derived from hundreds of years of close scrutinizing, proved hypotheses, and millions of dollars of research, much of alternative medicine is a conglomeration of well-intentioned beliefs, unproven observation, and religious paraphernalia. For example, Ayurveda is a form of alternative medicine that has origins in the country of India. According to Ayurveda, humans contract illness because of an imbalance caused by dosha, a disruption of “cosmic rhythm.” Of course, it is true that scientists have defined disease as a disruption of the normal course of the body. However, there is no scientifically backed assertion that humans get sick because of an imbalance of vata, pitta, kapha, life forces made up of natural elements like fire, wind, and air, that govern the functions of the body. Woven into this form of alternative medicine is the consequence of using Ayurvedic tonics and herbal remedies in place of or in conjunction with science-based medicine. It can be dangerous to rely solely on Ayurvedic remedies without a full scientific understanding of their effects on the body, because such medicines can be toxic or can negatively react with conventional medications. In spite of this, people today still use Ayurveda. This is the pattern with many forms of alternative medicine, which is why science-based medical supporters do not generally accept these types of medical treatments (“Basis for Ayurvedic Philosophy”).

The fact that Ayurveda is still practiced today displays a postmodern mindset. However, the connection between postmodernism and how alternative medicine functions in our society is not an obvious one. The tenets of postmodernism are likewise ambiguous. One of the major marks of this movement, however, is an exaltation of an individual’s personal experience or
definition of meaning. In the postmodernist point of view, “If it is all meaningless, yet we are
driven to create meaning within our own lives, then meaning must come from within—meaning,
right, wrong, and all absolutes are created by an individual’s own moral code” (Rice). With this
concept of individually defined meaning comes a reluctance to question what other people define
as truth. For, if truth is defined by personal conviction, who is to say that anyone’s definition of
truth is wrong?

When these tenets of postmodernism enter the realm of medicine, and particularly the
area of alternative medicine, unstable practices can be exchanged for tested facts. According to
one author, “Postmodernism denies many of the ways by which…a medical therapy, can be
assessed and judged. Therefore bogus research may carry as much weight as properly structured
and controlled research….” (O'Mathúna). Because of this postmodern unwillingness to question
alternative medicine, practices such as Ayurveda can be accepted as valid procedures. Another
layer to the combination of alternative medicine and postmodern thought is that, because no one
can claim that they practice the absolute truth, alternative medicine is just as legitimate as
science-based medicine. Following this reasoning, science-based medicine is essentially one
choice among many health choices of equal value.

To be clear, alternative medicine is not wholly detrimental to patients. For example,
many people find relief from pain in practices such as chiropractic and acupuncture. It is true that
different types of alternative medicine can be beneficial when informed by science and used in
conjunction with conventional medicine. This is because, in general, when alternative medicine
complements science-based medicine, the problem of postmodern thought and blind acceptance
is abolished. When this is the case, such “complementary” medicine does not enter into the danger and risks posed when postmodernism and alternative medicine combine.

However, alternative medicine plagued by postmodern acceptance does at times replace conventional medicine. In these cases, it becomes a problem. Author Arthur Miller illustrates a similar situation, a widespread exchange of fact for personal experience in a society, in his play The Crucible. This story is set in the year 1692, in the small Puritan town of Salem, Massachusetts. The plot follows the progression of a frenzied witch-hunt. Dozens of previously respected citizens are imprisoned on charges of witchcraft, even if there is only one “witness” testifying against the accused. Ultimately, innocent characters are killed for their supposed alliance with the Devil. The tragedy in this play is that people allow superstition to enter an arena where it has no place: the justice system. In addition to this, the vast majority of the characters fail to question the misuse of justice for fear of being cast in an unfavorable light.

The Crucible warns of danger as the lives of innocent people are thrown away. Yet, this warning has real-world implications. When alternative medicine, untested and unproven, completely takes the place of science-based medicine, it is much like superstition invading the courtroom. In addition, a postmodern mindset creates difficulty in questioning alternative medicine, just as the citizens of Salem failed to openly circumspect their witch-hunting methods and punishments. When these comparisons are taken into account, the parallels between the witch-crazed town of Salem and the current postmodern beliefs applied to alternative medicine are uncomfortably similar (O'Mathúna).
In the world of medicine, this danger illustrated in *The Crucible* manifests itself when patients are harmed. For example, there is a growing list of people who have chosen homeopathic remedies over conventional medicine—with fatal results. The decision to combat disease with solely homeopathy means taking medicines that consist of greatly diluted substances such as minerals or organic materials. The resulting solutions, the “medications,” contain virtually no trace of the original mineral, and it has yet to be proven scientifically that homeopathy is a safe and reliable drug to combat disease. Yet, people still put faith in this form of alternative medicine. For instance, a woman named Jaqueline Alderslade died in 2001 when she gave up her asthma medication because of the advice of a homeopath. Another example is Isabella Denley. This little girl, an epileptic 13 month-old, died when her parents decided to treat her with homeopathic remedies instead of her anti-convulsion prescription. And finally, a 52-year-old man, Russell Jenkins, passed away after he followed the advice of a friend to treat a wound with her special homeopathic remedy. His wound contracted gangrene, he failed to seek medical attention, and the disease spread until it killed him (Barrett; “What’s the Harm”).

These are just a few examples of alternative medicine used in cases where it was inappropriate. These three people died because of bad judgment on their part or because of the unwise choices of other people, such as the case of infant Isabella Denley. When contrasted against the Hippocratic Oath then, there is strong evidence that homeopathy does not keep patients from harm. However, in a postmodern point of view, who is to say there is a problem with these stories of failure? For, according to postmodernism, what is true for some people, even the reliability of conventional medicine, does not have to be true for others.
But ineffective treatment is not the only downfall of alternative medicine. Because of the generally less regulated nature of alternative therapies, it is easier to introduce fraud into alternative medicine than it is to treat hospital patients with a placebo. For example, the parents of Linda Epping, an eight-year-old with cancer on her left eye, were convinced by a chiropractor that their child’s cancer could be cured with herbal remedies. The chiropractor sold the parents hundreds of dollars worth of pills, though the pills did nothing and Linda died shortly after from the cancer. The chiropractor was convicted of murder, but the very fact that the parents had faith in a back specialist rather than a trained surgical team at a hospital is a testimony of the danger that exists in allowing alternative medicine to exist alongside conventional medicine as an equal.

In the long run, however, dozens of cases of death and fraud concerning alternative medicine are not shocking, for conventional medicine has its own stories of fatal failure. No, a more fundamental truth is at stake when alternative medicine replaces science-based medicine. In the words of one doctor:

…The universe [could care less] what we humans believe about it. Gravity will still cause you to tumble to the ground. Cancer cells don’t pay attention to the observer’s intentions and observations. Neither do microbes. As science has shown us, they do, however, pay attention to chemotherapeutics and antibiotics. (Gorski)

Postmodernism cannot apply to medicine because diseases and the functions of the human body don’t respond to medicines based on philosophy or personal opinion. This is the bottom line: postmodern theory of relative meaning and objective truth does not mesh with the highly delicate and science-dependant world of medicine.
Given these facts about alternative medicine, we need to act wisely when faced with a situation in which someone needs medical attention. Total dependence on alternative medicine to heal a patient can cause them to suffer from ineffective treatment leading to fraud, further injury, or even death. Proven methods of conventional medicine need to inform the treatment. Where the human body is involved, observation of how it works, and not philosophies or personal beliefs, should govern treatment. This is the way medicine has functioned successfully for hundreds of years. When postmodern thought fails to keep patients from harm and injustice, it must be questioned and attacked. Just as superstition has no place as evidence in the courtroom, alternative medicine as an equal to conventional medicine has no place in the medical arena of our culture.


“What’s the Harm in Homeopathy?” What’s the Harm? 19 April 2011

<http://whatstheharm.net/homeopathy.html>.