A champion of CAM

Professor George Lewith talks about the relationship of complementary medicine with conventional medicine

When did you first take an interest in CAM?
Not until I had completed my medical training at Cambridge and London and had moved into primary care. My wife and I went travelling shortly after we were married in 1977 and were the first British people to go on an acupuncture course in China. I was immediately interested in this ‘new’ approach and wanted to research it in a rational, thoughtful way, while at the same time being faithful to the techniques. I wrote some of the very early clinical trials on acupuncture, as well as a number of methodological papers in the early ‘80s, and have been working in the same field since.

Do you still practise CAM?
I used acupuncture, nutritional and herbal medicine as well as a variety of homeopathic techniques as a clinician, before I retired from practice in 2011.

Do you think recent reforms to the health system will create opportunities for complementary therapists in the NHS?
Yes, but what will happen within the commissioning groups is very opaque. I think we will have a mixed economy, where some services will be paid for by the NHS and others not. Therefore, commissioning groups may sanction certain therapies, but not be able to pay for these, particularly in the long-term management of many chronic illnesses.

How do you take care of your health and well-being?
I try to keep fit and slim. I swim and ride a bike, and I have a garden that I enjoy very much. I also have acupuncture and see a very good Alexander technique teacher regularly for my back, as well as a physiotherapist occasionally, for some mobilisation work.

Do you have a favourite saying or quote?
As a clinician, I always started my consultations with ‘tell me your story’, which opens up the whole process, as opposed to ‘what is the one problem you’ve come to see about’.

George Lewith, a medically trained doctor and former CAM practitioner, is professor of health research at the University of Southampton, and has worked in research and complementary medicine for more than 30 years, during which time he has written more than 150 primary research papers.

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