

Humpty Dumpty and the
Language of Alternative
Medicine:
Some Implications for
Information Professionals
David J. Owen

Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Medical Library
Association (MLA), 2001

Alternative or Complementary?

Orthodox or Mainstream?

Holistic or Integrative?



***“When I use a
word,”
Humpty Dumpty
said,
“it means just
what I choose
it to mean””***

Some Current Terms

- Alternative
- Complementary
- Folk Medicine
- Fringe
- Holistic
- Integrative
- Mind-Body
- Natural
- New Age
- Non-traditional
- Traditional
- Unorthodox

Importance of Correct
Terminology

- Word meanings can have a significant impact on credibility, application and regulation in the profession of medicine
- Complicates information retrieval
- Complicates indexing and cataloging

“Alternative Medicine”

- “interventions neither taught widely in medical schools nor generally available in US hospitals.”
– Eisenberg et al. JAMA

Mainstream/Orthodox Medicine

- Dominant medical system in the United States and other developed nations
- Claims to be “scientific”
- Synonyms:
 - Scientific medicine
 - Conventional
 - Traditional
 - Allopathic

Allopathy vs. Homeopathy



Homeopathy

- “a substance that produces a certain set of symptoms in a health person has the power to cure a sick person manifesting those same symptoms.”
- “Like cures like”

Allopathy

- “the method of treating disease by the use of agents that produce effects different from those of the disease treated (opposed to homeopathy).”
- From Greek “other than disease.”
- Drugs prescribed have no relationship to symptoms

Alternative

- “offering or expressing a choice”
- Implies a choice, suggests that both may be effective
- A therapy for use instead of “conventional” treatments
- Shark cartilage, magnets, spiritual healing

Complementary

- “Of two (or more) things: Mutually complementing or completing each other's deficiencies”
- When a therapy is used in addition to “conventional” treatments
- Peppermint tea to help with nausea, practice meditation to reduce stress, or undergo acupuncture for chronic pain

Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM)

- “Complementary and alternative healthcare and medical practices (CAM) are those healthcare and medical practices that are not currently an integral part of conventional medicine”

– NCCAM

Holistic Medicine

- Wholistic
- A form of medical treatment that attempts to deal with the whole person and not merely with his or her physical condition
- Archaic, used as a synonym for alternative medicine
- Importance: Holistic nursing

Integrative Medicine



Integrative Medicine

- “Seeks to combine the best of both traditional and non-traditional approaches and techniques to address the biological, psychological, social and spiritual aspects of health and illness. “

– Osher Center for Integrative Medicine (OCIM)

Importance of Correct Terminology

- Complicates information retrieval
 - need to research the language
- Complicates indexing and cataloging

MeSH Headings for Herbs

- Ayurvedic
- Drugs, Chinese Herbal
- Ethnobotany
- Ethnopharmacology
- Herbs
- Medicine, Herbal
- Materia Medica
- Pharmacognosy
- Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM)
- Plant Extracts
- Plants
- Plants, Medicinal
- Valerian

Bach Flower Remedies



- MEDLINE MeSH
 - Homeopathy
 - Plant Extracts
 - Aromatherapy
 - Alcoholic Beverages
- Other databases
 - Horticultural industry
 - Herbs
 - Plant Oils

Today's "Alternative" is Tomorrow's "Complementary"

- The list of practices that are considered CAM changes continually as CAM practices and therapies that are proven safe and effective become accepted as "mainstream" healthcare practices.

Acupuncture

- Alternative or Complementary?
- In U.S., prior to 1970s, considered a quack procedure

Importance of Correct Terminology

- Word meanings can have a significant impact on credibility, application and regulation in the profession of medicine
- Complicates information retrieval
- Complicates indexing and cataloging