

The Alternative Fix

FRONTLINE

WGBH
125 Western Avenue
Boston, Massachusetts
02134
617.300.3500
Fax: 617.300.1001
www.pbs.org/frontline

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THE ALTERNATIVE FIX

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After two years, \$48,000, and six attempts at in vitro fertilization, Gil and Christie Goren said, “Enough.”

Frustrated by their experiences with fertility specialists and modern medicine in general, the Los Angeles, California, couple decided to take a different approach to getting pregnant. Foregoing test tubes and artificial insemination, they placed their hopes and dreams for a child into the hands of a group of traditional Maori healers visiting from New Zealand. The head of the healers, “Papa Joe,” has told Christie that following his treatment—which involves deep tissue massage and chanting—she will likely become pregnant within three weeks.

“I was so broken hearted and my soul needed a little soothing that I just decided to stop the in vitro,” Christie Goren says. “I kind of knew that I needed to make the choices, that I needed to find what was going to heal me.”

The Gorens are not alone. They are among a growing number of Americans whose disenchantment with modern health care has led them to seek alternative therapies. From acupuncture to homeopathy, herbal supplements to chiropractic, complementary and alternative medicine has become a \$48 billion a year industry in America—one that traditional hospitals and medical schools are now eagerly embracing. But do these treatments actually work? Are they safe? And have medical professionals put aside their doubts in the efficacy of complementary medicine treatments in order to cash in on a multimillion-dollar market?

In “The Alternative Fix,” airing Thursday, November 6, at 9 P.M., on PBS (check local listings), FRONTLINE® examines the controversy over complementary and alternative medicine. The one-hour documentary features interviews with staunch supporters, skeptical scientists, and other observers on both sides of the alternative medicine debate and questions whether hospitals that offer alternative therapies are conveying a sense of legitimacy to these largely untested and scientifically unproven treatments.

“It’s a big business,” says Dr. Marcia Angell, a senior lecturer at Harvard Medical School. “A lot of people have a vested interest in complementary and alternative medicine.”

FRONTLINE traces the mainstreaming of alternative medicine to the halls of Congress and one U.S. senator’s allergies. Viewers meet Sen. Tom Harkin (D-Iowa), who recalls complaining to a friend about his terrible allergies. The friend said he knew someone who could cure the senator’s allergies using bee pollen.

“I went on this very tough regimen of taking a lot of bee pollen, sometimes as much as sixty pills a day,” Harkin tells FRONTLINE. “And literally on about the tenth day, all of a sudden my allergies just left.

“Well, that’s when I began to think, ‘We’ve got to have somebody looking at these different approaches.’”

Harkin, the chairman of the Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education Committee, convinced Congress to allocate \$2 million to the National Institutes of Health (NIH) for the study of alternative medicine. It was a move that was not well received within the traditional medical community.

“There was this reaction that witchcraft and sorcery and alchemy and voodoo were being introduced into the National Institutes of Health,” medical historian James Whorton says, “and it had no place there, and that this was purely a political plea.”

“The Alternative Fix” also examines the passage of the 1994 Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act (DSHEA), a controversial bill that limited the Food and Drug Administration’s power to regulate dietary supplements at a time when the FDA was gearing up to increase its regulation of what has since become an \$18 billion a year industry.

To Sen. Orrin Hatch (R-Utah), one of the bill’s proponents, DSHEA is “a bill of freedom. It’s a bill that allows the American people to have access to high-quality dietary supplements that can enhance their lives and help them live better lives.”

Physicist Dr. Robert Park disagrees. “It would be my candidate for the worst piece of legislation ever passed,” he says.

Park, author of *Voodoo Science*, notes that one of the key provisions of the act took away the FDA’s ability to ensure that supplements were proven safe and effective before they made it to drugstore shelves.

“Under the [act],” Park says, “the Food and Drug Administration can’t really get involved until, as somebody put it, the bodies start piling up.”

Adds Dr. Tom Delbanco of Boston’s Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center: “It’s wonderful right now to be someone who makes herbal drugs. I wouldn’t be regulated, no one would be watching

over my shoulder. The only people who would be interested in me are my stockholders to see how big a profit I can make.”

Not everyone in the medical community, however, is so skeptical of complementary and alternative medicine. Some of the nation’s leading hospitals and medical centers, in fact, have embraced these lucrative therapies, offering them alongside more traditional treatments. New York’s Beth Israel Medical Center, for example, now houses the Continuum Center for Health and Healing, which offers such alternative treatments as guided imagery, acupuncture, and homeopathy—despite the fact that some practitioners confess to not knowing how or why their treatments work.

In the documentary, for example, viewers watch Beth Israel Dr. Edward Schultz treat a five-year-old boy’s behavior problems with pills that contain microscopic amounts of ground up tarantula—a treatment other doctors in the film say can’t possibly be effective.

The charges don’t seem to trouble Dr. Matt Fink, former CEO of Beth Israel Medical Center. “If hospitals don’t get involved in these kinds of programs they will lose patients because patients will go elsewhere,” Fink tells FRONTLINE. “So, like any other new discoveries, you can either lead or you can follow.”

Still, the question remains: Do complementary and alternative medicine treatments actually work? In “The Alternative Fix,” FRONTLINE examines the few research studies conducted on alternative treatments, while also previewing several larger studies currently underway, including one of the largest studies ever done on the efficacy of acupuncture. Yet even if these new studies prove that the treatments in question are no more effective than a placebo, will the legions of consumers who spend billions on them be swayed?

Not likely, alternative treatment proponents say.

“People are fed up with being passive recipients of authoritarian, paternalistic medicine,” says noted alternative healer Dr. Andrew Weil. “And many of these systems make people feel they are more autonomous, more in charge of their own destiny.”

Hester Young agrees. In the past fifteen years, Young has battled breast cancer, rectal cancer, and lung cancer. But after undergoing chemotherapy and other traditional therapies the first two times around, she says she simply couldn’t face the debilitating treatments when her doctor diagnosed cancer in her lungs. Although never confirmed through a biopsy, she began looking for alternative cancer treatments.

Today, five years later, she credits her survival to a special regimen prescribed by Dr. Nicholas Gonzalez, an alternative cancer specialist who prescribes controversial—and expensive—treatments such as repeated coffee enemas and megadoses of supplements to cancer patients desperate for a cure.

Just ten years ago, Gonzalez’s therapy led to a fight with the New York State Medical Board which found instances of incompetence and negligence in his evaluation of several patients. Gonzales maintains the case was an attack on his unconventional cancer regimen.

Yet the NIH is currently studying Dr. Gonzalez’s claims that nutritional therapy can help prolong life for cancer patients. But if the tests conclude the doctor’s treatments are ineffective, Hester Young doesn’t want to hear it.

“Nothing they could say would make me feel differently,” she says, “because I’m feeling well and it’s a success as far as I’m concerned.”

Christie and Gil Goren feel similarly. At the end of the documentary, viewers check in with the Gorens. Three weeks have passed and Christie is still not pregnant. Nevertheless, the couple remains optimistic.

“I think if people were to look at this [documentary] and think, ‘Oh, they’re just hoping...’” Christie Goren says. “We both feel like, ‘What else is there?’”

“The Alternative Fix” is a FRONTLINE co-production with A Little Rain Productions. The producer, writer, and director is Raney Aronson.

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The executive producer for FRONTLINE is David Fanning.

Press contacts:
Erin Martin Kane [erin_martin_kane@wgbh.org]
Chris Kelly [chris_kelly@wgbh.org]

(617) 300-3500

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