



Spirituality and Health: Perspectives of Complementary and Alternative Medicine Practitioners

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Type of Publication: Original Research Paper

Conflicts of Interest: Nil

Abstract

Background: Spirituality is considered as an integral part of holistic approach to patient care. It is believed to play a crucial role in recovery of patients. Spiritual beliefs can also impact the coping mechanisms of persons suffering from illness.

Objective: To explore opinions of complementary and alternative practitioners regarding spirituality and health and their perceptions concerning characteristics of spiritual healers.

Methodology: Qualitative survey conducted among Complementary and Alternative Medicine practitioners from different states of the country. Their opinions regarding spirituality and health and also perceived characteristics of spiritual healers were explored by conducting personal interviews.

Results: Among 244 CAM practitioners surveyed, 236 (96.7%) respondents had faith in God/ spirituality and 197 (80.7%) were of the opinion that their faith had role in recovering from disease. According to 27(11.1%) respondents holistic approach was similar as spiritual care combining mind, body and soul. The most common perceived characteristic of spiritually healthy individual was strong will power, physically sound and being mentally alert perceived by 178(73.0%) respondents. Spiritual health in medical care was considered as extremely important by 168(68.9%) respondents. Whereas, 206 (84.4%) respondents felt need of formal training for better patient care.

Conclusions and Suggestions: Spirituality came out to be the perceived need of CAM practitioners for better care of patients. Some desired characteristics of being spiritual and practicing spirituality in caring of patients should be developed among practitioners. There is a need of future research work designing more scientific studies for better understanding and evaluation of spirituality and health

Keywords: Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM); Healing; Holistic Care; Spirituality; Spiritual Needs

Introduction

Spiritual dimension of health is very important and also very difficult to understand. Spirituality is believed to play a crucial role in recovery of patients. Spiritual beliefs can also impact the coping mechanisms of persons suffering from illness. Many studies support the view that spirituality is positively

related to health and attention to a patient's spiritual health hastens recuperation and assists in prevention of the disease.¹⁻⁷ One of our earlier studies conducted in the north Indian city of Chandigarh emphasized the importance of spirituality of caregivers and 86% caregivers were of the opinion that spirituality can provide better patient care.⁸

Need of spiritual orientation was also felt by 60.5% caregivers in that study. Spirituality is also considered as an integral part of holistic approach to patient care. Holistic Health supports reaching higher levels of wellness as well as preventing illness.⁹ Holistic health includes all aspects of people's needs, psychological, physical and social and to be seen as a whole.¹⁰ An impressive body of research has shown convincing evidence that spirituality is positively related to health. About 82% patients were having faith in spirituality as Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM).¹¹ Our earlier study was confined to opinions of cancer patients regarding spirituality and reported 37.9% cancer patients were of the opinion that spirituality and health were interrelated and their faith in spirituality was increased after sufferings from cancer reported by 61.6% patients.¹²

The effect of spirituality on health is an important yet neglected area of active research. A few studies are concerned with spirituality of patients and their opinions regarding healing. However, there is lack of literature concerning opinions of health care providers regarding role of spirituality in improving health of patients. Therefore, present study was conducted as a part of detailed research sponsored by ICMR, to explore opinions of complementary and alternative practitioners regarding spirituality and health and their perceptions concerning characteristics of spiritual healers.

Materials And Methods:

Qualitative survey was conducted as a part of study funded by Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), New Delhi. Results are based on a cross-sectional study conducted among Complementary and Alternative Medicine practitioners in different fields selected from different states of the country. Their opinions regarding spirituality and health and perceived characteristics of spiritual healers were explored by conducting personal interviews using semi-structured interview schedules. Questionnaires/schedules were filled by interview method asking questions in local/understandable language. Only participants giving consent were included as per the Ethical guidelines. Content analysis of responses was done and results were expressed using frequencies and percentages in the

form of frequency tables. Focus Group Discussions (FGD) were also organized to explore their opinions.

Results:

The study included 244 CAM providers including 148(60.7%) males and 96(39.3%) females. There were 209 (85.7%) practitioners having some professional degrees whereas remaining 35(14.3%) were not having any professional degree. They included 121(49.6%) experts from Ayurvedic and 54(22.1%) Homeopathic practitioners and 42(17.2%) were experts from Tibetan System of Medicine. There were 236 (96.7%) respondents who had faith in God/ spirituality and 197 (80.7%) were of the opinion that faith on God/ spirituality has role in recovering from disease (Table -1). Among those having faith in God/ spirituality, 77(39.1%) respondents were of the opinion that it improves will power/ concentration. There were 71(29.1%) respondents of the opinion that existence of God improves health while 55(22.5%) gave opinion that strong will power/ strong faith lead to positive improvement in health.

Respondents expressed varied opinions regarding holistic approach to health. The most common view came out to be physical, mental, environmental, spiritual factors, social factors along with social system as revealed by 64 (26.2%) respondents. There were 27(11.1%) respondents who considered holistic approach to be similar as spiritual care with combination of mind, body and soul.

Table-2 presents characteristics of spiritually healing individuals perceived by CAM practitioners. The most common perceived characteristic of spiritually healthy individual was strong will power, physically sound and mentally alert reported by 178(73.0%) respondents followed by peace and calm reported by 172(70.5%) respondents. There were 192(78.7%) respondents who thought that recovery becomes faster for spiritual individuals with blessing of God and 134(54.9%) respondents were of the opinion that spirituality may be dynamic in the patients' understanding of the disease. The most common aspect of spiritual care reported by respondents was listening to patients fears, hopes, pain and dreams reported by 149(61.1%) respondents followed 127(52.0%) of the opinion that it was balancing body, mind and soul. According to 209(85.7%) respondents, physician should address patients spiritual beliefs and should be sensitive to their

values and 189(7.5%) respondents were of the opinion that physicians should inquire about spiritual beliefs of patients. There were 149 (61.1%) respondents who reported that they cater spiritual needs of patients in their respective practices, mostly for depressed and anxiety patients mainly through counseling. Spiritual health in medical care was considered as extremely important by 168(68.9%) respondents. Whereas, 206 (84.4%) respondents felt need of formal training for better patient care and about 198 (81.1 %) felt that spirituality of doctors can be helpful in providing better patient care.

Discussion/Conclusion:

During project several academic deliberations/FGD were also conducted. During those sessions, varied opinions were emerged regarding role of CAM in curing diseases like cancer. Some of experts/CAM practitioners were reluctant of using the term CAM for their respective therapies. Lot of controversies was prevalent as experts from some specific fields claimed that their therapy was the main line of treatment and can do wonders in patient care. The study presented results based on perceptions of CAM practitioners and their point of view reading spirituality and health attained through semi-structured interviews and focused group discussions (FGDs). Lack of scientific evidences may be the barrier in support of their claims. Their claims are yet to be proved scientifically. There is possibility of under representation of some therapies due to reluctance of some CAM therapist in different fields

to take part in the study in spite of our best efforts. These limitations may serve as guidelines for future research work designing more scientific studies overcoming these issues.

The study explored varied opinions of CAM practitioners in favor of positive role of spirituality adopting holistic approach to patient care. Spirituality may be helpful in understanding the disease, sufferings of patients and more holistic and compassionate systems of care. Some desired characteristics of being spiritual and practicing spirituality in caring of patients should be developed among practitioners. Study also emphasized the need of formal training of health caregivers/CAM practitioners to address spiritual needs of patients for better patient care. Spirituality came out to be the perceived need of the patients as well as of doctors and should be given priority. There is a need of future research work designing more scientific studies for better understanding and evaluation of spirituality and health.

Acknowledgements:

Present study is a part of Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), India sponsored project “Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) Use among Cancer Patients”. Authors are grateful to Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), New Delhi, India for providing financial assistance. Authors also acknowledge the assistance by the ICMR project staff for their respective contributions.

Table 1: Opinions of CAM providers regarding spirituality and health”

Opinion of Special health care providers (N=244)	No.	%
Have faith in God/ spirituality		
Yes	236	96.7
No	3	1.2
No response	5	2.0
Faith in God/ spirituality has any role in recovering from disease		
Yes	197	80.7
No	44	18.0
No response	3	1.2
Faith in God/ spirituality has role in recovering from disease like		

cancer (N=197)		
Improves will power/ concentration	77	39.1
It cures the disease faster	41	20.9
It brings positivity in patient's life.	37	18.8
It provides divine healing	12	6.1
Ill effects of our past deeds effects our present	09	4.5
Positive nature helps to reduce cancer cell	07	3.5
By psychological well being	05	2.5
Its depends on patients and disease also	04	2.0
By God blessing and faith leads to healing	03	1.5
Faith help in charging the energy channels of our body	03	1.5
It all depend upon our Karma and Sanskar and only God have power to punish	03	1.5
Spirituality helps to recover the disease affective by Karmic actions	02	1.0
We are what we believe we are	01	0.5
Opinion about the "existence of God in improving health". (N=244)		
Faith in God can cure anything.	71	29.1
Strong will power/ Strong faith lead to positive improvement in health.	55	22.5
It gives emotional support/ hope for life/ positive attitude	29	11.9
It reduces depression through meditation	21	8.6
It increases our immune power	11	4.5
May be it helps/ Maybe not	02	0.8
It gives holistic treatment	06	2.5
Faith cure but Science is more prevalent and it dominates rest everything.	04	1.6
I treat, he cures	02	0.8
God is neither in heaven nor in temple. It is in your faith	02	0.8
No role in improving health	01	0.4
It depends on patient to patient	01	0.4
Nothing	01	0.4
Don't know	01	0.4
Meaning of Holistic Approach (N=244)		
Physical, mental, environmental, spiritual factors, social factors along with social system	64	26.2
Spiritual care with combination of mind, body and soul	27	11.1

Divine has the role to play, faith in God	13	5.3
Combined effects to cope with medical disorders	11	4.5
Inner and surrounding areas of health	11	4.5
Broader way of life, meditation, pranic healing, yoga to reduce the stress.	06	2.5
360 degree approach towards life, all care done under one roof.	06	2.5
Patient should be treated as whole entity and not as part of entity	05	2.0
Required for self-satisfaction	04	1.6
Exercising, eating healthy and sleeping well	03	1.2
Five elements- earth, water, fire, air & space forms our body and balancing these five elements is holistic approach.	02	0.8
Alternative medicine is holistic healing	02	0.8
Without side-effects	01	0.4
Healthy soul	01	0.4
Mental healing	01	0.4
Don't know	01	0.4
Complete wellbeing	01	0.4
Believe in saying of GITA	01	0.4

“Table 2: Perceived characteristics of spiritually healthy individuals and role of spirituality in health”

Characteristics of being spiritually healthy individuals	No.	%
Strong will power, physically sound and mentally alert	178	73.0
Peace and calm	172	70.5
Cheerful and satisfied	152	62.3
Tolerant, patient and manage stress better	152	62.3
Honest and noble	132	54.1
Helping in nature, lovable	126	51.6
Ability to forgive self and others	126	51.6
Can face / deal with death better	112	45.9
Believe in one's own worth and goodness	97	39.8
Religious convictions may affect health care decision making	95	38.9
Optimistic and have well defined aims and objectives in life	85	34.8
Sense of some control over one's own life	83	34.0
Talk less and listen more and have balanced nature	81	33.2
Logical, have justifiable approach and better judgment	77	31.6

Strong will, physically sound and mentally alert with no effect of emotions	76	31.1
Importance do you give to spirituality in improving health		
Recovery becomes for spiritual individuals with blessing of God	192	78.7
Spirituality may be dynamic in the patients' understanding	134	54.9
Spirituality doctors/ practitioners can deal better with illness	86	35.2
An understanding of the patients spirituality to whole patient care	79	32.4
Spirituality may be a patient need and important in coping of patients	74	30.3
Religious convictions may affect health care decision making	59	24.2
Non spiritual individual suffers more from disease like cancer	35	14.3
Any other	08	3.3
Any other (N=08)		
It depends on nature	01	12.5
Maintaining balance is important, state of equilibrium	01	12.5
Psychological benefit	01	12.5
Spirituality must be understood in scientific perspective	01	12.5
It is all because of karma	01	12.5
Aspects of spiritual care		
Listening to patients fears, hopes, pain and dreams	149	61.1
Balancing body, mind and soul	127	52.0
Being attentive to all dimensions of patients and their families	85	34.8
Obtaining a spiritual history	35	14.3
Incorporating spiritual practices as appropriate	54	22.1
Involving chaplains as members of the inter disciplinary health care team	28	11.5
Physician should address patients spiritual beliefs and be sensitive to their values or not		
Yes	209	85.7
No	29	11.9
No response	6	2.5
Physician inquiry about spiritual belief		
Yes	189	77.5
No	46	18.9
No response	9	3.7
Cater with the spiritual needs of the patients		

Yes	149	61.1
No	87	35.7
No response	8	3.3
Specific Patients who need spirituality (N=149)		
For Depressed / anxiety Patients	49	32.9
All patients visiting clinics	33	22.1
Psycho somatic patients	23	15.4
Patients suffering from any chronic disease	19	12.8
Patients suffering from life style diseases	11	7.4
Patients who are badly in need of help and understanding	06	4.0
Patients with great faith and feels sense of relief	04	2.7
Sexual problem related patients	02	1.3
Patients who need healing therapy	01	0.7
At the final stage of disease	01	0.7
Muslims and Christians	01	0.7
In a way (N=149)		
Through counseling	54	36.2
By advising them to practice yoga/ Reike / Meditation/ Pranayam	22	14.8
By motivation	17	11.4
It diverts the mind of the patient	14	9.4
By acknowledging patients personal faith	12	8.0
Through clinical therapies / relaxation therapy	11	7.4
Taking life history of patients	07	4.7
By listening to them	03	2.0
Praying at the clinical before seeking the patient	02	1.3
By giving Bible and Quran	01	0.7
Grade the importance of spiritual health in medical care		
Extremely important	168	68.9
Less important	60	24.6
No role	8	3.3
No response	8	3.3
Formal training of health professional may help in better patient care addressing their spiritual needs		
Yes	206	84.4

No	3	1.2
Can't say	35	14.3
Doctors spiritual health helps in providing better patient care		
Yes	198	81.1
No	4	1.6
Can't say	42	17.2

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