

RHEUMATOLOGISTS AND THEIR PATIENTS WHO SEEK ALTERNATIVE CARE: AN AGREEMENT TO DISAGREE

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SUMMARY

Alternative treatment, such as homoeopathy, acupuncture and spiritual healing, are popular among patients with rheumatic diseases. Rheumatologists are therefore likely to be confronted with patients who make use of less orthodox health care. Patients' and rheumatologists' views on the subject and on the rheumatologists' role, however, have not yet been assessed.

A questionnaire on alternative medicine was sent to all 101 practising Dutch rheumatologists (response rate: 70%). After the results had been analysed 17 rheumatologists, seven rejecting alternative medicine and ten accepting it, handed out a questionnaire to a sample of their patients: 1466 patient questionnaires were distributed (response rate: 80%).

Of the respondents 43% had visited an alternative practitioner at least once for their rheumatism and 26% in the year before the survey was held. Hand healers, homoeopaths and acupuncturists were most often visited. Rheumatologists, on their part, were not too enthusiastic about these visits. Only patients' visits to spa treatment centres were welcomed by a majority of them; visits of their patients to manipulative therapists, acupuncturists and homoeopaths were judged positively by a large minority, whereas other therapies were strongly disapproved. Nevertheless, most patients informed their rheumatologist about their visiting an alternative practitioner. A surprisingly low percentage of these patients noticed that the rheumatologist did not sympathize with it. Although many patients paid a visit to an alternative practitioner because regular care did not really help them, their satisfaction with the alternative treatment turned out to be less than their satisfaction with the rheumatologists' help.

Although a growing number of Dutch general practitioners and physiotherapists apply alternative methods themselves—contributing to an integration of (parts of) it in the regular care system—the rheumatologists do not follow their example.

KEY WORDS: Alternative treatment, Homoeopathy, Acupuncture, Spiritual healing.

ALTERNATIVE treatment, such as homoeopathy, acupuncture and healing, are popular among patients with rheumatic diseases. In recent investigations the percentage of patients with rheumatoid arthritis who made use of alternative methods at least once, was found to be as high as 68–94% [1–4]. These figures, however, refer to the use of all unorthodox remedies, including home remedies such as the wearing of copper bracelets and the use of specific foods or diets. The percentage of patients who have at some time or other visited an alternative practitioner for rheumatic disease ranged from 25% to 54% [1, 3, 5, 6]. The popularity of alternative treatment is even more striking given that the efficacy of such treatment in patients with rheumatic diseases is still debatable [7–11]. The fact that chronic rheumatoid arthritis cannot be cured and may result in disability [6] might lead to a quest for additional help. Rheumatologists are likely to be confronted frequently with patients who make use of this less orthodox health care. The rheumatologists' reaction to this phenomenon is important, especially in their relationship with their patients. Rheumatologists themselves are well aware of this situation. In 1981, the Dutch Association of Rheumatologists published an official statement and advised its members to respect the decision of a patient to try an alternative treatment and to keep him or her under their care [12].

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In The Netherlands elements of alternative medicine tend to become integrated into the regular care [13]. Alternative medicine is being accepted by the Government [14] and by many general practitioners [15]. The views of rheumatologists and their patients, however, have not yet been assessed.

In this article the results of a recent investigation into the rheumatologists' role with regard to alternative therapies will be given. The following questions will be answered:

1. To what extent are patients with rheumatic disease making use of alternative medicine? What kind of alternative medicine is applied? Are they satisfied with the help given by alternative practitioners, in comparison with the help given by rheumatologists?
2. What is the rheumatologists' attitude towards these visits? To what extent do they themselves engage in alternative medicine?
3. What expectations have patients of their rheumatologist, in theory as well as in practice? Is there a difference between patients of rheumatologists with a more or less positive or negative attitude towards alternative treatment?

METHODS

A questionnaire was sent to all practising rheumatologists in The Netherlands. Questions referred to their attitude towards alternative medicine, their actual contacts with alternative practitioners and their 'self-

TABLE III
RHEUMATOLOGISTS' ATTITUDE TOWARDS THEIR PATIENTS' VISITS TO ALTERNATIVE PRACTITIONERS (IN PERCENTAGES; N = 71)

Alternative method	Rheumatologists' attitude towards these methods			
	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Not answered
Acupuncture	37	54	10	—
Alternative diets	7	39	51	3
Anthroposophical medicine	14	62	15	9
Astrology	—	17	68	16
Cell therapy	—	16	75	10
Ear acupuncture (auriculo therapy)	6	31	54	30
Enzyme therapy	—	25	72	3
Faith healing	—	47	46	7
Spa treatment centre	68	30	3	—
Herbalism	9	51	37	4
Homoeopathy	23	59	15	3
Iridology	—	17	80	3
Manipulation	49	41	8	1
Naturopathy	1	41	39	18
Neural therapy	3	28	51	18
Hand healing	4	31	58	7

Of all persons interviewed, 7% had tried two or more methods in the last 3 years. More than one-half (63%) of the respondents had visited an alternative practitioner because regular care did not really help them or because an alternative treatment was seen as a last resource. Although 25% of the respondents visited on their own initiative, 54% mentioned family or friends as important advisers.

Patients' satisfaction with the alternative treatment was measured by asking respondents to give a judgement about some aspects of the help received, ranging from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 10 (very satisfied). They also judged the help given by the rheumatologists. In Table II grades given by patients who had visited an alternative practitioner in the last 3 years are compared to those given by patients who had never been there.

Grades given to both alternative practitioners and rheumatologists were high. Patients who had visited an alternative practitioner in the last 3 years, gave statistically significant lower grades to their rheumatologists' help than patients who had not chosen additional alternative help (middle and right column, $P < 0.05$). The efficacy, in particular, of the treatment given was less highly valued. Grades given to the alternative practitioner, however, were even lower (left and middle column; $P < 0.05$, except the item on 'time spent').

Rheumatologists and alternative medicine

The Dutch rheumatologists' attitude towards alternative medicine in patients with rheumatic diseases can be described as rather sceptical. In Table III the respondents' views on their patients' visits to alternative practitioners are shown.

Only visits to a spa treatment centre were judged positively by the majority of the respondents; a (large) minority held positive views on manipulation, acupuncture and, to a lesser extent, homoeopathy. Dutch rheumatologists strongly opposed the use of hand healing, one of the alternative methods that had been applied most frequently to their patients. The use of

alternative diets was not welcomed either. A possible effect of alternative treatment was ascribed by 60% of the rheumatologists to placebo effect. About 80% thought that patients visited an alternative practitioner mainly because they were pressed by others.

In daily practice, rheumatologists hardly ever engaged in alternative medicine themselves. Only 14% of the respondents (10 rheumatologists) prescribed homoeopathic remedies incidentally. Manipulation and alternative diets were applied by 9% and 3% of the respondents, respectively.

Referring patients to an alternative practitioner was more common. Forty-two per cent of the respondents had at some time referred patients to one or more alternative practitioners. On average, in 1988, every Dutch rheumatologist referred 10 patients for manipulation, six patients to a spa treatment centre and three patients for acupuncture. More younger than older rheumatologists referred patients to alternative practitioners (51 versus 33%), as was the case in the less urbanized parts of the country (55 versus 34%) and the district hospitals versus university hospitals (48 versus 30%).

A high percentage of the respondents (65%) reported having contacts with one or more alternative practitioners. These contacts included the exchange of information regarding their patients or less frequently discussing the method of treatment. Contacts with manipulative therapists, homoeopaths and acupuncturists were the most common (Fig. 1).

In general, contacts of rheumatologists were restricted to alternative practitioners with a medical or paramedical background, e.g. (other) medical doctors or physiotherapists. Contacts with practitioners without any legally recognized medical background were scarce. The majority of the respondents also restricted these contacts to doctors and physiotherapists using alternative methods in the same hospital.

In spite of their scepticism towards alternative medicine, rheumatologists held the view that they should have sufficient knowledge of the most important alternative methods so that they could advise their patients

TABLE IV
RHEUMATOLOGISTS' JUDGEMENT OF THEIR PATIENTS' VISITS TO AN ALTERNATIVE PRACTITIONER, AS SEEN BY THE PATIENTS (IN PERCENTAGES)

Patient said rheumatologist knew about the visit and	All patients	Patients of:	
		Accepting rheumatologist	Rejecting rheumatologist
Approved it	50	63	29*
Had a neutral attitude	36	27	51*
Disapproved it	2	1	4
Patient does not know	11	9	16
<i>n</i>	187	117	70

* $P < 0.001$.

TABLE V
SATISFACTION OF PATIENTS WHO HAVE VISITED AN ALTERNATIVE PRACTITIONER WITH SOME ASPECTS OF THEIR RHEUMATOLOGISTS' WORK (IN GRADES; MEAN SCORES)

	All patients	Patients of:	
		Accepting rheumatologist	Rejecting rheumatologist
Friendliness	8.6	9.0	8.0**
Efficacy of treatment	7.3	7.5	6.9*
Information on treatment	8.0	8.5	7.1**
Interest shown	8.0	8.6	7.1**
Time spent	8.0	8.4	7.4**
Information on disease	7.9	8.4	7.0**
<i>n</i>	300	183	117

* $P < 0.05$; ** $P < 0.001$.

this phenomenon. It should be noted too, that the patients interviewed were those who regularly visited the rheumatologist.

Rheumatologists are not too enthusiastic about the fact that many of their patients seek alternative care. They are willing to approve their patients' use of only some of the alternative methods (spa treatment centres, manipulation, acupuncture, homoeopathy—in that order). Rheumatologists do not approve visits to hand healers, which is very much at odds with the fact that hand healing has most frequently been tried by their patients. In practice, the rheumatologists' involvement is restricted to discussing the subject with the patients and occasionally referring patients and contacting alternative practitioners on shared patients.

In The Netherlands, a growing number of general practitioners and physiotherapists apply alternative methods themselves, most often manipulation, homoeopathy and acupuncture [13, 15]. In general, the rheumatologists do not follow their example. Still, it may be presumed that the more alternative medicine is applied by medically qualified people, the greater will be its acceptance amongst rheumatologists.

Although most patients visit an alternative practitioner on their own initiative, this does not mean that these visits are not known to the rheumatologists. On the contrary, in most cases the doctor knows about them, either because he is the referrer himself or (more frequently) because the patient tells him about it. The rheumatologists' sceptical attitude is not noticed by their patients: in their view, most rheumatologists approve or are neutral. Open disapproval is only seldomly mentioned. However, patients of 'accepting'

rheumatologists—whether or not they visit alternative practitioners themselves—are more satisfied with their doctor's functioning, especially regarding his communicative qualities. This implies that having an open mind towards alternative medicine might have something to do with a doctor-patient relationship in which not only somatic aspects of the disease have a place.

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