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Discussion Essay I
Anthropology 358: Primitive and Folk Medicine
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Question: Where do we as a society draw the line between what we will (as principally adherents of Western biomedical approaches) and won't accept as viable alternative (or "complimentary") medical specialists and approaches?

It is true that our society has seen an upsurge in alternative medical practices. The evidence can be seen all around in the presence of massage therapists, chiropractic clinics, and even acupuncturists. These practices, both imported and invented, have changed in their importance over the last several decades as our population becomes more diversified, and indeed, more economically divided. Alternative or complimentary practices become more accessible for those who are uninsured, and for those with few options.

In addition to practitioners and practices, our society has seen an increase in the number of "Natural" supplements or vitamins. Things like St. John's Wort, Echinacia, and others, have flown off the shelves of Wal-Marts nation wide for many years now, and there seems to be no end of their popularity. People sell and purchase Shark Liver Oil, scented oils for healing, ear wax removal candles and even magnetic bracelets on a daily basis in this country. Natural health stores have become more popular and are appearing in more affluent neighborhoods.

But how much of this is covered by insurance, and how much is guaranteed by the United States Government? Not much. Even though scientists have been working to study, using double blind experiments, many of these substances and practices, the hard

reality and fact remains that there is just not enough research to positively identify which supplements and/or practices have any effect on illness, or the results that are intended (as in the case of St. John's Wort).

Insurance does not cover many traditional or alternative practices. However, after some research, it may cover more. In the case of Massage Therapy, research was done which provided ample evidence to support its positive clinical effects on patients ability to heal, thereby becoming a more common practice that is covered by most insurances. On the other hand, counseling of many sorts, is not covered by most insurance plans. Over time, perhaps more and more of these practices will be covered by standard insurance plans, and even gain the seal of approval by agencies of the United States Government.

The question has been posed, essentially, "*where do we draw the line.*" This is a good question, and one that deserves some debate. I would enter that debate with the following thoughts, however, though further evidence brought to bear could cause me to change my decision. My answer is economically pragmatic, and surprisingly conservative, given my more liberal ideology regarding other social issues. I feel that if a practice has not survived a rigorous double blind scientific study, and been commented on by the scientific community, then it does not warrant coverage by insurance, or endorsement by any agency of the U.S. Government. Meaning this: I do not currently

believe Shamanistic practices should be covered by insurance. I feel Shamanistic practices, like we witnessed in the film, are in the same category as “prayer” which, while I will agree has some physical effect on the patient (i.e. increased endorphin levels, adrenalin, and possibly even cortisol), has shown little or no effect on disease treatment overall. Therefore, I do not feel it should be covered by either taxpayers, or insurance companies. However, were prayer or Shamanistic practices to pass a double blind scientific test and prove beyond a doubt to the scientific community that they were effective in disease treatment, then they should by all means be covered.

In addition to alternative practices, I feel the same way toward alternative supplements or “Naturalpathy.” Herbal medicines, many of which do have seemingly positive effects on disease prevention, should be subject to the same rigorous testing as alternative medical practices, in my opinion. One caveat, however, is that large pharmaceutical companies may have an adverse effect on the testing of these substances. The profit motive of these companies could cloud the judgment of their research teams, causing inadvertent, or even blatant misinterpretation of the data. That warning aside, I still feel that these herbals should be tested before they are approved by any US agency, and prescribed by doctors. It is my belief that consumers should be cautious when taking these herbal supplements as well, as many have not been tested well, and their effects on individuals could vary wildly within the population.

To sum up: I believe that alternative practices and herbal remedies, medicines and supplements that have survived a rigorous double blind scientific study, and peer reviewed, should be covered by insurance companies, and endorsed by agencies of the United States Government. Those that have not, should not be covered or endorsed. This is an economically conservative view, I know. It is also a very skeptical and scientific view, in my opinion. I am not opposed to people seeking out alternative practitioners, or even taking herbal supplements (with the obvious caveat about herbals that I mentioned above.), quite the contrary. I believe people should be able to seek any method that they are comfortable with. However, I simply do not feel it should be covered if there is no scientific proof that the procedure or supplements works. When there is, my story may change.