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Alternative health care finally getting its due

Physicians referring patients to complementary practitioners, medical schools integrating care

HALIFAX — For the Morris siblings, integrated medicine is a family affair.



PAUL DARROW/CNS

Dr. Glenna Morris is a doctor of naturopathic medicine and runs an integrated clinic with services that include chiropractors, massage therapists, orthotherapists, nutritional and emotional counsellors and a medical practitioner.

Naturopathic doctor Glenna Morris, said that having a sister who is an MD has generated a healthy respect for their respective medical disciplines.

" My sister and I went though the process so close together in medical school, it helped me stay open to mainstream medicine, and opened her to knowing how rigorous study was for naturopathic medicine," she said. Her open-mindedness has played a part in the success of her integrated health clinic, Balance Health Centre.

Demand there has been consistently strong for the four naturopathic doctors, a chiropractor, two massage therapists, two colon therapists and a life coach who work on site.

Putting alternative health services under one roof has proven a benefit for an industry that often faces skepticism on the part of patients and doctors, she adds. "The model works because we offer a professional setting, and that builds trust with patients."

Naturopathic doctor Katherine Willow has been providing integrated health services at the Carp Ridge EcoWellness Centre northwest of Ottawa since 1997. Not only does the site provide naturopathic care, massage therapy, orthotherapy, and nutritional and emotional counselling services, Willow has also engaged a medical doctor to complete the picture.

Having spent close to 13 years in promoting integrated care, she has seen a considerable shift in attitudes. "People have become more educated and [are] pushing this. Now we're getting some referrals from medical doctors — which is quite new and wonderful for us." She said having an MD on site is an important factor in building patient trust.

Retailer Tom Weir, general manager for FeelGood Natural Health Store & Clinic in Oshawa, Ont., also sees the value in creating a central site for alternative health services. The store has two clinic rooms that are shared by multiple practitioners, including a naturopath, a homeopath, osteopathic doctor, acupuncturist and reflexologist. It is situated next door to a large medical clinic.

The interest in complementary and alternative medicines is gaining traction with all types of customers, Weir said, from seniors looking to treat health conditions, to business professionals and parents interested in preventive care for their children. There are even a few canine patients.

Offering services in a public setting allows practitioners to demystify things for customers, said Rajesh Ragbir, a naturopathic doctor who works three days a week at the store clinic. "We see people from all across the spectrum who aren't quite sure what they need but are interested in learning more. In some cases, they are frustrated with what they are getting in the medical community. Others are quite happy with their medical doctors. We're here to show that it doesn't have to be an either/or proposition."

That type of thinking is what led the Michael G. DeGroote School of Medicine's department of family medicine at McMaster University to encourage physicians to examine alternative therapies first. It is the first university in Canada to include exposure to alternative medical practitioners through on-site visits and information exchange as part of its core curriculum.

According to department chair Dr. David Price, "It's quite clear that patients are accessing alternative and complementary therapies. Yet physicians in general have little to no awareness of what a naturopath, chiropractor or massage therapist does. It simply makes sense to expose students to these fields so they can look at these disciplines critically and understand what their patients are doing."



"Studies show that 73 per cent of Canadians in their lifetime use complementary and alternative medicine," said Dr. Esther Konigsberg, assistant clinical professor at McMaster, who helped to develop the program. "Medical students get to see how these practitioners work, the results they achieve, and how to engage with patients. A lot of times it totally opens up their minds to these fields and how they can work together to deliver more effective results."

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