

Prince defiant over alternative medicine after doctors' attack

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By Jenny Booth and Mark Henderson

'The Prince of Wales today issued an impassioned plea for alternative medicine to be given a bigger place in the mainstream, hours after a group of Britain's leading doctors issued their own appeal for the NHS to stop paying for complementary therapies.

The Prince addressed the annual meeting of the World Health Organisation in Geneva, arguing that an integrated, holistic approach was the best way of tackling chronic disease, rather than a "dangerously fragmented" approach that relied just on what he called the bio-physical treatment model.

While not detracting from modern medicine, which he said had served humanity well, he criticised excessive reliance on it for upsetting natural harmony.

"I believe there is now a desperately urgent need to redress the fragile but vital balance between man and nature, through a more integrated approach where the best of the ancient is blended with the best of the modern, and I am convinced this is particularly vital when it comes to the collective health of people in all our countries," he told the WHO delegates from 192 nations.

But in a direct challenge to the Prince's campaign, 13 British doctors and scientists issued an open letter to NHS trusts that said public funding of "unproven or disproved treatments" such as homoeopathy and reflexology were unacceptable while huge deficits are forcing trusts to sack nurses and limit access to life-saving drugs.

The scientists, who include some of the most eminent names in British medicine, have written to the chief executives of all 476 acute and primary care trusts to demand that only evidence-based therapies are provided free to patients.

The letter criticises two of the Prince's flagship initiatives on complementary medicine: a government-funded patient guide prepared by his Foundation for Integrated Medicine, and the Smallwood report last year, which he commissioned to make a financial case for increasing NHS provision.

Both documents, it is claimed, give misleading information about scientific support for therapies such as homoeopathy, described as "an implausible treatment for which over a dozen systematic reviews have failed to produce convincing evidence of effectiveness".

The letter was organised by Michael Baum, Emeritus Professor of Surgery at University College London, and other supporters include six Fellows of the Royal Society, Britain's national academy of science, and Professor Edzard Ernst, of the Peninsula Medical School in Exeter, who holds the UK's first chair in complementary medicine.

The signatories include Sir James Black, who won the Nobel Prize for Medicine in 1988, and Sir Keith Peters, president of the Academy of Medical Science, which represents Britain's leading clinical researchers.

The Prince did not fuel the row by referring to the letter in his speech to the WHO this afternoon. He did however stick to his guns, saying that increasing numbers of alternative therapies - including acupuncture for osteo-arthritis of the knee, the use of St John's Wort for mild depression - were being shown in clinical trials to have therapeutic effects.

And he singled out his Foundation for Integrated Medicine for praise, saying that for the last 11 years it had been the leading champion of the integrated approach to health treatment. This involved harnessing both modern and traditional therapies, looking at social and environmental influences, and empowering the patient by involving him in his own treatment, he said.

"I say that a mix of modern and traditional remedies that emphasises the participation of the patient can create a powerful healing force," said the Prince.

"It seems to be that in our ceaseless rush to modernise, many tried and tested methods which have shown themselves to be effective have been cast aside as old-fashioned or irrelevant to today's needs."

Professor Baum, a cancer specialist, said that he had organised the letter because of his “utter despair” at growing NHS acceptance of alternative treatments while drugs of proven effectiveness are being withheld.

“At a time when we are struggling to gain access for our patients to Herceptin, which is absolutely proven to extend survival in breast cancer, I find it appalling that the NHS should be funding a therapy like homoeopathy that is utterly bogus,” he said.

He said that he was happy for the NHS to offer the treatments once research has proven them effective, such as acupuncture for pain relief, but that very few had reached the required standards. “If people want to spend their own money on it, fine, but it shouldn’t be NHS money.”

The Department of Health does not keep figures on the total NHS spending on alternative medicine, but Britain’s total market is estimated at £1.6 billion.

The doctors’ dismissal of homeopathy has drawn a heated response from practitioners who say anecdotal evidence from thousands of relieved patients cannot be ignored.

Professor George Lewith, from the Centre for Complementary and Integrated Medicine, said: “People are happy to pay for complementary medicines because it makes them feel better, even though they are only 10 per cent more effective than placebo. Maybe the 13 doctors have forgotten that the conventional treatments for asthma, depression and irritable bowel are also only about 10 per cent better than placebo.”

But Dr Peter Canter, a research fellow in complementary medicine at the Peninsula Medical School in Exeter, called for more trialling of therapies, and warned that some treatments, including homeopathy, had already been proved ineffective over years of testing. He suggested that patients ignore the anecdotes and look for “sound scientific evidence” for and against treatments.

He said: “It’s all very well reading anecdotes from 10 happy homeopathy patients. You don’t hear from the 100 others who received absolutely no benefit.”

Britons currently spend £130 million a year on complementary treatments, such as acupuncture, herbalism and reflexology.’

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