

Module Response 2
War on Medicine: “Conventional” vs. “Alternative”

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Chemistry 2211: The Chemistry Between Us

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Have you ever found yourself in a health crisis, exclaiming things like “I’ve tried everything!” “Nothing helps!” or “My Doctor isn’t listening to me!” You would not be alone in that feeling or situation. It is very common for individuals to feel unsupported in a medical or health crisis, and oftentimes, they will turn to *Dr. Google* for answers or seek alternative routes to bettering their health. To that end, these types of solutions are often referred to as holistic, alternative, complementary, or integrative medicine.¹ One should note that this is not a small quantity of individuals, in fact, there are whole camps of people who rely solely on these forms of treatment, and view them as a dogmatic doctrine. Conversely, Western or ‘conventional’ medicine is a method based on contemporary research that assesses the human body and its maladies in terms of biochemistry. What we are left with then, is a strong divide between “conventional” and “alternative” medicine, or as some would state “Western” and “Eastern” medicine. My interest in this area is sparked by its correlation to concepts tied to vitamin supplementation in our second module. It is my intention to explore this hotly debated dichotomy and dismantle the argument that Western medicine is the enemy, with active concession to both sides, and a shift towards trusting science.

The first misconception that stands out to me is that Western doctors are seen by holistic believers as ‘pill pushers’, ‘surgery seekers’ and ‘device dependent.’ In his article, *Labels Like ‘Alternative Medicine’ Don’t Matter. The Science Does*², Aaron E. Carroll points out that alternative or Eastern medicine is frequently thought of as being more “natural.” While this is not wrong altogether, there is a clear false distinction at play. What exactly is “natural” about claiming to be able to harness intangible energy, pricking people with needles, or putting supplements in their systems which we now know can have equally as negative chemical reactions as Western drugs?³ Furthermore, “natural” does not equate to “safe.” Many alternative therapies that include a wide range of botanicals and dietary supplements, such as vitamins are *not* subject to FDA approval before being sold to the general public.⁴ In addition, you can acquire them without a prescription. Thus, as I frustratingly stated in a weekly material response, it is up to you to choose what is good, better, or best. We are at the mercy of the manufacturers and marketers of

¹[*We Should Abandon the Concept of “Alternative Medicine.”*](#)

²[*Labels Like ‘Alternative Medicine’ Don’t Matter. The Science Does.*](#)

³[*We Should Abandon the Concept of “Alternative Medicine.”*](#)

⁴[*Complementary and Alternative Medicine.*](#)

these products to tell us, or not tell us, about what we are consuming. Carroll also properly emphasises that mainstream medicine does not only involve medications and surgery, it also includes science-based elements such as nutrition, exercise, physical therapy, and relaxation.⁵ In addition he concedes to the fact that not all Western drugs are created in a lab, and doctors frequently advise the use of supplementation when necessary (e.g. pregnant women to take folic acid, a B vitamin, and vitamin C and D to ward off scurvy and rickets, respectively).⁶ Finally he states, “none of these things are controversial to physicians. We recommend them all the time. That’s not because they were developed in the Western Hemisphere. It’s because they have been subjected to the rigor of scientific investigation — and found to have merit.”⁷

Perhaps a lack of respect has not afforded this same luxury to alternative methods, and there is not as much scientific investigation to give them value. This calls for change. A shift towards trusting science does not mean a favour to one side or the other, it means favouring the *truth*. Carroll highlights the fact that those who support Western medicine can be equally as jaded. Too often, the medical community refuses to alter its behaviour when presented with information that cutting-edge technology might not be beneficial.⁸ It is when we concede to both sides, that we might come up with a more wholesome system for treating our populations. For example, some studies have shown that acupuncture worked for individuals, more than those in non-acupuncture control groups.⁹ Humorously yet unfortunately, “if acupuncture were a drug, with the exact same level of evidence, it would be attacked as a Big Pharma conspiracy”¹⁰ by the same group of people who currently support it. This level of backwards criticism goes for both sides.

Ultimately, I feel like there should be a shift towards finding scientific evidentiary support for many pathways to health. There are systems that can work cooperatively between both ideologies, and where a middle ground is found insofar as they are both supported by ample research and evidence. Rather than fighting with a mindset of being morally superior, we should be considering what combination of both could be most beneficial overall.

⁵[*Labels Like 'Alternative Medicine' Don't Matter. The Science Does.*](#)

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ [*We Should Abandon the Concept of "Alternative Medicine."*](#)