

## TOPIC GUIDE: ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE AND INDIAN HEALTHCARE

**"ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE SHOULD BE EMBRACED AS AN ESSENTIAL PART OF HEALTHCARE IN INDIA"****PUBLISHED: 01 DEC 2009****AUTHOR: JENNIE BRISTOW**

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**INTRODUCTION**

*Note that this Topic Guide was produced for Debating Matters India, and looks at the issues from a specifically Indian perspective.*

Alternative medicine is a major enterprise in India. In November 2009, the government's Ministry of Health and Family Welfare **announced** the steps it would be taking to promote 'Indian Systems of Medicine' in the country, including spending Rs. 922 crore on the promotion of **AYUSH** (Ayurveda, Yoga & naturopathy, Unani, Siddha and Homoeopathy). Major claims have recently been made for alternative medicine – such as that **Ayurveda** can be used for **anaemia** or **ano-rectal ailments**, and that **homeopathy** can be used to **prevent or cure swine flu**, or to treat **Aids and malaria**.

In an era characterised by evidence-based science and politics, should official endorsement be given to remedies that cannot be scientifically proven? Is alternative medicine a form of **quackery**, which puts patients at risk? Or is the interest in alternative medicine a positive sign that we are beginning to move beyond a too-narrow approach to disease, towards recognising the more subtle relationship between mind and body and the need to find holistic cures? Do traditional medicines play an important role in preventive medicine, contributing to a more affordable and effective healthcare system than the **Western medical model**?

*For further reading use the menu bar on the right hand side.*

**DEBATE IN CONTEXT**

*This section provides a summary of the key issues in the debate, set in the context of recent discussions and the competing positions that have been adopted.*

## What is complementary and alternative medicine (CAM)?

Many discussions about alternative medicine today take place under the umbrella term ‘**complementary and alternative medicine**’ (CAM). This implies that alternative medicine should not be seen solely as something that can be used instead of conventional medicine, but **can and should be used alongside it**. CAM refers to treatments that differ from **conventional**, or ‘**allopathic**’, medicine – medicine based on scientific testing that is taught to medical professionals. Systems of CAM have often **evolved apart from and earlier than** the conventional medical approach used in the Western world. Some such systems, such as homeopathy and naturopathy, have developed in Western cultures; others, such as traditional Chinese medicine and **Ayurveda**, have developed outside of the West.

## Does CAM work – and if so, how?

Critics of CAM argue that the very term is problematic, giving mysticism more scientific credence than it deserves. As the editors of the prestigious Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) have **argued**: ‘there is no alternative medicine. There is only scientifically proven, evidence-based medicine supported by solid data or unproven medicine’. Advocates of CAM, however, argue that the lack of scientific evidence about the efficacy of CAM betrays too narrow an approach to the understanding and treatment of illness. They point to the failure of conventional medicine to cure certain serious diseases, such as cancer, and the extent to which patients suffering from these diseases **can be helped** by therapies like Ayurveda. They note that conventional medicine has itself moved towards a more holistic appreciation of the treatment of disease, and that **some natural remedies or techniques**, such as **the use of quinine** to treat malaria, have been adopted and accepted by practitioners of conventional medicine.

Even critics of CAM do not dispute that in many cases, alternative remedies can make patients feel better, despite not curing the disease – so isn’t this a worthwhile goal in itself? The importance of **preventive medicine**, including lifestyle modification, has been globally acknowledged: it is seen as better and more cost-effective to enable people to avoid physical or mental illnesses in the first place, rather than simply trying to treat the disease when it emerges. Alternative medicine, it is argued, has **a crucial role to play** in this. Furthermore, in a society like India, for which the **affordability of healthcare** is a major challenge, **different models** need to be sought that make the most of the country’s experience and expertise, including in the field of alternative medicine. Advocates argue that the orientation of CAM ‘towards self-healing and health promotion (salutogenesis rather than pathogenesis)’ make ‘alternative medicine approaches to chronic diseases especially attractive and affordable for the **developing countries**’.

## The rise of CAM

One of the key aims of the government scheme the **National Rural Health Mission** is to ‘encourage a healthy lifestyle and alternative systems of medicine through AYUSH’. In November 2009, Chief Minister, BS Yedyurappa, **told a conference** that access and awareness of alternative medicines should be spread in rural areas. The officially-recognised status of alternative medicine in India is also indicated by the reach of the **Indian Institute of Alternative Medicines and Indian Board of Alternative Medicines**, established in 1991 by Dr.Suresh Kumar Agarwal; and **the appointment of Smt. S. Jalaja IAS** as secretary to the Department of AYUSH.

The growing interest in, and promotion of, alternative medicine by the political and medical authorities is not confined to India. Despite being at the forefront of advances in conventional, ‘Western’ medicine, the USA provides **a significant market** for traditionally Indian and Chinese remedies. Organisations such as the **National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine** contribute to the official status of alternative medicine in the USA. In the UK, a major debate took place in 2006 about whether CAM should be **provided by the National Health Service (NHS)**. In the

USA and UK, **affordability of healthcare** is also a key issue, raising questions about whether attachment to the Western model of medicine is appropriate even for Western societies, let alone other cultures.

### **A different kind of medicine?**

These developments show that CAM is not an unregulated, maverick market, but is fast becoming subject to **official and scientific research and regulation**. Advocates of CAM argue that quacks can be **weeded out** by better training and standard-setting. Some also argue that criticism of alternative medicine arises from a **Western bias**, which distorts the facts about CAM and refuses to countenance its effectiveness. Critics, however, point to **concerns about the safety** of certain forms of alternative medicine. Discussions about the affordability of alternative compared to allopathic medicine lead to concerns that patients are being duped by **irrational** treatments that will not make them better. Shouldn't a universal healthcare system ultimately seek to provide proven cures for illnesses, rather than taking the cheaper but less effective route of alternative medicine?

## **ESSENTIAL READING**

*It is crucial for debaters to have read the articles in this section, which provide essential information and arguments for and against the debate motion. Students will be expected to have additional evidence and examples derived from independent research, but they can expect to be criticised if they lack a basic familiarity with the issues raised in the essential reading.*

### **When East Meets West: Why Consumers Turn to Alternative Medicine**

ScienceDaily 20 November 2009

### **Needed: 'basic' doctors of modern medicine**

Meenakshi Gautham and K.M. Shyamprasad **The Hindu** 5 November 2009

### **Q&A: Complementary therapies**

BBC News Online 23 May 2006

### **Interview With Ashis Nandy: 'Every tradition has its dark side'**

Parshuram Ray **Humanscape** January 2001

### **Alternative System of Health Care**

Indian Government

### **In defence of scientific medicine**

Michael Baum **Manifesto Club**

## **FOR**

### **Health Care Reform Should Include Preventive Medicine**

Navi Radjou **Harvard Business Review** 7 August 2009

### **'Alternative' Medicine Is Mainstream**

Deepak Chopra, Dean Ornish, Rustum Roy and Andrew Weil **Wall Street Journal** 9 January 2009

### **Holistic medicine demystified**

Dr Hiramalini Seshadri **The Hindu Magazine** 15 May 2005

### **Reflections on Ayurveda**

Dr Mohana Krishnaswamy **The Hindu** 4 September 2001

## **AGAINST**

### **Book review: Suckers – How alternative medicine makes fools of us all**

Eisha Sarkar **Mumbai Mirror** 5 November 2009

### **Where doctors fail**

Dr. Sudha Vidyasagar **The Hindu** 5 September 2009

## **Ayurveda under the scanner** [↗](#)

Meera Nanda **The Hindu Magazine** 8 April 2008

## **Sticking a needle in alternative medicine** [↗](#)

Stuart Derbyshire **spiked** 28 November 2007

## **KEY TERMS**

*Definitions of key concepts that are crucial for understanding the topic. Students should be familiar with these terms and the different ways in which they are used and interpreted and should be prepared to explain their significance.*

### **Ayurveda** [↗](#)

### **AYUSH** [↗](#)

### **Complementary and alternative medicine** [↗](#)

### **Conventional medicine** [↗](#)

### **Homeopathy** [↗](#)

### **Placebo effect** [↗](#)

### **Preventive medicine** [↗](#)

### **Quackery** [↗](#)

## **BACKGROUNDERS**

*Useful websites and materials that provide a good starting point for research.*

### **The Use of Complementary and Alternative Medicine in the United States** [↗](#)

National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine December 2008

### **Skin Deep: Ancient, but How Safe?** [↗](#)

Abby Ellin **New York Times** 17 September 2008

### **Role of Ayurveda in the Management of Cancer** [↗](#)

Dr. Joban Modha and Dr. Neha Modha **Boloji.com** 2 December 2007

### **Complementary and Alternative Medicine May Reduce Risk of Some Diseases** [↗](#)

US Disease Control Project June 2007

### **Kerala's Crisis in Public Health** [↗](#)

C.R. Sonam **Boloji.com** 3 February 2007

### **Sense About Homeopathy** [↗](#)

**Sense About Science** September 2006

### **All in the mind?** [↗](#)

Anjana Ahuja **The Times (London)** 24 May 2006

### **Awash in Ancient Hindu Wisdom** [↗](#)

Peter Jaret **New York Times** 9 March 2006

### **Bottling Ancient Secrets** [↗](#)

Michele Orecklin **Time Magazine** 31 July 2000

### **Focus: Alternatives in holistic healing** [↗](#)

Pratibha Gadhalay **The Hindu: Opportunities** 14 June 2000

### **An interview with Dr. V. Sukumaran MBBS, MD (ped) health and mind science consultant** [↗](#)

Malini Suryanarayanan **The Hindu: Opportunities** 14 June 2000

### **Placebo effect** [↗](#)

Robert T. Carroll **The Skeptic's Dictionary**

## ORGANISATIONS

*Links to organisations, campaign groups and official bodies who are referenced within the Topic Guide or which will be of use in providing additional research information.*

## IN THE NEWS

*Relevant recent news stories from a variety of sources, which ensure students have an up to date awareness of the state of the debate.*

### **Ayurvedic methods to cure ano-rectal ailments** [↗](#)

Naveen Kumar **Times of India** 21 November 2009

### **Drugs for affordable health care sought** [↗](#)

**The Hindu** 21 November 2009

### **Promotion of Alternative Medicine System** [↗](#)

**Press Information Bureau: Government of India** 20 November 2009

### **Anaemia treatment by ayurveda from December 8** [↗](#)

Simran Virk **Times of India** 17 November 2009

### **'Need to combine Ayurveda with modern medicine'** [↗](#)

**Times of India** 15 November 2009

### **CM bats for alternative medicine** [↗](#)

**Expressbuzz** 15 November 2009

### **Medicine takes an alternative route** [↗](#)

Nikhila Henry **Times of India** 26 September 2009

### **'Homeopathy can prevent, cure swine flu'** [↗](#)

**Times of India** 18 August 2009

### **Alternative medicine to the rescue** [↗](#)

Chitra Nair **Times of India** 13 August 2009

### **Boost for public healthcare** [↗](#)

**Times of India** 9 July 2009

### **'Rs. 4,000 crore for alternative medicine'** [↗](#)

**The Hindu** 22 March 2009

## AUDIO/VISUAL

This site contains links to websites operated by parties other than Debating Matters. Although we make every effort to ensure links are current, they will sometimes break after Topic Guide publication. If a link does not work, then the publication reference and date should enable you to find an alternate link. If you find a broken link do please send it to the **webmaster** for review.

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