
Workshop Summary

PerspektivForum “Grand Challenges”

Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and Stiftung Jugend forscht e. V.

October 14–16, 2018 Berlin

Title: “The Rise of Alternative and Complementary Medicine: Benefit or Threat to Global Health?”

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Summary:

Everyone can choose by themselves how they want to seek health. Whether it is by biomedicine or non-conventional medicine (traditional, complementary or alternative). In the workshop we mainly asked ourselves: What is health? What is traditional, complementary or alternative medicine (TCAM)? How can TCAM benefit us? And when would you use TCAM? The definition of TCAM is vague. It merges the terms “traditional medicine (TM)” and “complementary or alternative medicine (CAM)”. Traditional Medicine refers to knowledge and practices, which are indigenous to different cultures. Complementary or Alternative Medicine is not part of that country’s own tradition or conventional medicine and is not fully integrated into the dominant health-care system (WHO Traditional Medicine Strategy, 2014-2023). In western countries for example herbal medicine, acupuncture, homeopathy, etc. are seen as TCAM.

In 2001 the WHO defined health as a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. In western countries we mainly use Allopathic Medicine, which aims to combat and overcome the effects of disease by the use of remedies, like drugs or surgery. This practice performs well and has evidence based results, but is often criticized as it only sees the patient as a body and the emotional part is neglected. Traditional or Alternative Medicine, the often times underestimated part of health care, could complement Allopathic Medicine and eliminate its drawbacks. However, TCAM too has its downside. Alternative Medicine is often times only based on experience and there are not many guidelines. Before TCAM can be integrated into the health-care system guidelines and policies have to be developed and more data about the results of TCAM has to be acquired. In this way harm by Alternative Medicine could be prevented, ensuring an optimal evidence based health care.

In the first part of the workshop we discussed how TCAM could be safely implemented in Western Countries, how it is already used and how TCAM and biomedicine could be better merged in countries where the medical infrastructure is not as developed. In the second part we wanted to get a further understanding about Alternative Medicine in our society. How do people define “classical” and alternative/traditional medicine? What do they think about TCAM practices? And when would they use classical or alternative medicine?

For this survey we randomly asked different people on the street and questioned some employees of pharmacies. In a short time, we could gather a broad spectrum of opinions. There was an unanimous agreement on the definition of TCAM and classical medical practices: Everyone in our interview defined Classical Medicine as an evidence based practice with standardized procedures. Some remarked additionally that they think that Classical Medicine is more or less only focused on symptomatic treatments and very profit-orientated. Traditional and Alternative Medicine was defined by them as the opposite of Classical Medicine. It is based on experience with no clear procedures. The opinion on TCAM practices were deeply divided. While some people just said, that they don’t believe in it and would never use it if available - “It’s not science”, others were more receptive to the

idea or even use TCAM as a remedy. Most would pick Classical Medicine as their first choice of treatment, but consider Alternative Medicine as a possible option if Classical Medicine fails or has too many adverse effects.

The workshop was a valuable experience for us and allowed for insights into problems, we never thought about, of our own and other health-care systems. At the same time certain TCAM practices were discussed, we got to know new viewpoints and could evaluate our own opinion on this topic.