

Developing a National Vision for Complementary and Alternative Medicine in Undergraduate Medical Education
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**Introducing Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) into
Undergraduate Medical Education (UME): issues and challenges**

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The field of Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) is controversial, emotionally charged, and politically sensitive. As a result, the introduction of CAM into health care systems raises a variety of complex and challenging issues. Within medical schools, these challenges are compounded by several additional factors, including heightened scientific skepticism, resistance to change, concerns regarding liability and professional reputation, and wide diversity of opinion concerning appropriate curriculum content and teaching methods. This section is intended to outline some of the major challenges involved in developing a national vision for the introduction of CAM into undergraduate medical education (UME).

National vision, local autonomy. A national-level approach to CAM in UME could yield many potential benefits. These could include: accelerated progress up the learning curve through sharing of experiences and information; economies of scale in the development of high-quality teaching materials; and a strong united voice to represent CAM at the national level. The challenge is to achieve the benefits of a national vision while respecting the need for local autonomy and flexibility.

Platform independence. Among the 16 Canadian medical schools, there is great diversity in terms of culture, environment, language, and approaches to undergraduate medical education. As a result, a strategy for CAM in UME that may be most appropriate and effective at one school may be completely inappropriate at another. The challenge is to create a national vision that can be easily implemented in any Canadian medical school, regardless of the specific local circumstances.

Alignment with broader curriculum reform. Redesign of the undergraduate curriculum is currently underway within many Canadian medical schools. The challenge is to align the CAM component so that it can support, facilitate, and catalyze the broader process of curriculum reform.

Integration of therapeutic philosophies. Many CAM practices represent distinct healing systems, and as such, embody principles, values, beliefs, and concepts that differ from those of conventional medicine. Change agents can thus introduce CAM into medical curricula in several ways. One way is to force-fit CAM into the existing biomedical paradigm. A second way is to juxtapose CAM against the conventional paradigm, thus emphasizing the philosophical differences. A third approach is to create a blended strategy that integrates the principles of CAM with those of conventional medicine. These three approaches can be referred to as co-optation, co-existence, and systemic integration respectively. The challenge is to strike an appropriate, realistic, and politically feasible balance among these three models of collaboration.

Integration of delivery. Curriculum planning is typically fraught with major logistical issues involving timetables, facilities, hierarchies of academic prerequisites, and tight faculty schedules. Too often, in the face of these realities, CAM finds itself as a “second-class citizen”, typically treated as an add-on that is taught on the last day of class or when biomedical faculty are on vacation. The challenge is to make CAM an integral and fully recognized component of the undergraduate medical educational experience.

Evidence. Issues raised by CAM therapies go to the very root of philosophical and practical debates about science, knowledge, epistemology, research methodology, interpretation of data, and standards of evidence. The challenge is to address these issues in a way that does justice to this complexity without unduly muddying the waters, and without appearing as a plea for a lowered standard of evidence.

Teaching Methods. Attempts to teach and learn about CAM have involved a wide array of didactic, self-directed, and experiential methods. Little is known, however, about the relative effectiveness of various teaching methods. The challenge is to begin identifying which methods are most effective for teaching and learning about various aspects of CAM and under what conditions.