

#### 4 The Future of Alternative Medicine

within many countries. For example, homeopathic medicines have been reimbursed by the French national healthcare insurance for decades, while in other countries they are not. In Germany, medical doctors can prescribe herbal medicines like pharmaceutical drugs, while in France botanical medicine is not covered. In the US, great regional variation exists in the pattern of reimbursement for alternative forms of care, and most are not yet covered. In some countries (e.g. France), only physicians can legally practice any kind of medicine (including osteopathy, acupuncture and homeopathy), while in other countries (e.g. Great Britain and Germany) these same disciplines can be practiced by individuals who are not conventional physicians. Within the US, some 75 or so medical schools offer courses in AM. Most of these courses are elective, a few are now compulsory, and their curriculum varies widely.<sup>14,15</sup>

#### 4. Proposed Definition of Alternative Medicine

To provide a rational definition of AM, it is clearly necessary to identify common traits of these very disparate practices. Most of what falls under the scope of AM has its origins in traditional systems of health. It is apparent that some kind of spirituality, often directly related to the dominant religion or philosophical system of the originating culture, is an integral part of most traditional systems of health.<sup>5,13,16-19</sup> In contrast, for biomedicine, spiritual aspects are often deemed peripheral to health promotion. This tacitly understood position of biomedicine is congruent with the observation that spirituality or holistic philosophies are among the major reasons for the growth of AM in the West.<sup>3</sup>

Based on a number of observations, we have proposed that AM may well be defined as a broad set of healthcare practices (i.e. already available to the public) that are not readily integrated into the dominant healthcare model because they pose challenges to diverse societal beliefs and practices (cultural, economic, scientific, medical and educational).<sup>19</sup>

Theoretically, this definition could apply to any healthcare practice imported into any foreign country. As expected, it applies well to traditional systems of health imported into the West. However, less predictably, it also applies to the categorization of these systems practiced in countries that have adopted Western values. For example, traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) would be expected to be part of the mainstream in countries where there is a substantial Chinese population. Yet in Singapore, for example, whose population is close to 80% Chinese, TCM is “alternative”. This is because in Singapore, which has adopted Western values and lifestyles, TCM poses challenges at all the levels mentioned above, except the cultural one.

As a possible counter example, Ayurveda could theoretically be considered alternative by TCM practitioners and *vice versa*. However, both healthcare systems are based on the concept of “energy” (Qi in TCM, Prana in Ayurveda). In addition, both systems are holistic, and the respective multifaceted treatments include re-establishing a balance, dietary considerations, exercise, and use of medicinal plants. Therefore, the fundamental differences between the two systems may be small enough that the “challenges” presented by one system to the other are only mild or virtually non-existent.

## 5. Factors Posing Challenges to Integration of Alternative Medicine

Based on our definition, it is precisely *because* practices have some traits that make them “alternative” that they have not been studied, are not used in hospitals or taught in medical schools, and are not reimbursed by healthcare insurance companies, and not *vice versa*, as is implied in the current definitions of AM. As asserted above, the requirements of *science* are not the only reason why AM is deemed “alternative”. As implied in the proposed definition, a number of other factors have played a role, either to keep these practices out of mainstream healthcare or, on the contrary, to draw attention to them, and encourage considering them as potential therapeutic