

## 7. Conclusions

In the US and throughout the world, many non-scientific factors contribute to defining AM scope and the context for its evaluation. Therefore, to reach optimal integration, it is critical to take into account those many factors. For example, it is important to improve academic freedom for investigators to explore the variety of traditional medical systems, even if the principles they study seem to be difficult to reconcile with conventional biomedicine, at present. There is a welcome change in this direction since the NIH funded several academic centers dedicated to AM assessment at major US institutions.<sup>40</sup> We feel that, as another important factor in the development of AM, the alternative community should refrain from uncritical and premature enthusiasm for experimental results and theoretical implications that have not yet been thoroughly evaluated. While building theoretical models is intrinsic to the development of science, it is important to accumulate sufficient information and knowledge on the observed phenomena, based on solidly confirmed observations, instead of prematurely proposing hypothetical mechanisms.

The effort to take advantage of both alternative or traditional healthcare and mainstream Western medicine should be seen as a great opportunity, provided that the conceptual framework of systems is also taken into account along with the techniques and products used by these systems. Internationally, we have the opportunity to research, understand and mobilize a wider range of therapies to individualize clinical approaches, a trend seen by some as intrinsically and medically worthwhile. Such diversity of potential therapies and practices could result in more effective healthcare approaches, tailored to local or personal constraints as well as preferences, and to improved functioning of the medical, economic, political and social infrastructures as they impact on healthcare.

In this time of great scientific and medical opportunity and change, considerable economic promise exists in the growing markets derived from the increased use of alternative as well as high-tech medicine.

We hope that beyond a focus on developing profitable AM products, there will also be an abiding interest in improving world healthcare. Improvement in healthcare should include an attempt to understand and address the underlying issues that have prompted the public to seek AM practices, based on a clearer conceptualization of the nature and role of those therapies currently deemed alternative. All non-scientific and scientific factors that are shaping this unusually heterogeneous and potentially fruitful field must be taken into account for a thoughtful evaluation to yield more than incremental progress. More rapid and thoroughgoing progress in integrating medicine could yield multiple benefits of greatly improved healthcare worldwide, which in turn would support national as well as global economic and social progress, at the same time exploring important and exciting new areas of research.

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