

WHEN TRADITIONAL MEASURES FAIL . . . ALTERNATIVE FORMS OF MEDICAL HELP GARNER ATTENTION

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LOWELL -- The prescription in Rady Mom's hands does not look like a traditional prescription -- it doesn't even have a doctor's name imprinted on it. While the instructions are indecipherable to a visitor, they are not in the scribble of Western medical doctors.

The neatly scrolling Chinese characters actually prescribe herbal remedies that the Chinese have been using for thousands of years. Such remedies are used throughout much of Asia and are becoming popular in the United States. Mom, the 28-year-old proprietor of the RMT massage clinic and herbal pharmacy on Westford Street in Lowell, has studied the ancient remedies from childhood when he watched his grandfather use them. Today, the Cambodian immigrant makes a living practicing Chinese massage and refilling prescriptions written by herbalists in Boston's Chinatown. The prescription blends create a pungent aroma that hits the visitor upon entering Mom's small shop, which is crammed with Oriental curatives.

Mom is trained in "cupping," a therapy in which glass jars are used to detoxify the body, increase circulation and balance energy. The procedure involves placing an alcohol-soaked piece of gauze on the end of a pair of scissors, lighting it and using the flame to heat the air inside a palm-sized glass jar. Once the air becomes hot, the jars are applied along the body's **acupuncture** points. Held down by suction, they stay in place for up to 15 minutes, Mom said.

RMT is one of a handful of area establishments where merchants practice age-old folk medicine behind nondescript storefronts. They sell Chinese herbs, massage therapies, Hispanic health food, natural remedies and other age-old folk medicines.

Options range from simple teas that require little more than following directions on the label to elaborate rituals that intermingle medicine with religion.

Practitioners range from Chinese acupuncturists, who are licensed by the state, to Santeria priests and priestesses, who say their healing and helping powers come directly from God.

These therapies are popular among the state's recently arrived Latin American and Asian communities for many reasons. Some people simply prefer the medicines they have always used. Others may turn to folk practitioners because they lack health insurance or the economic means to seek out a Western doctor. People who are in the country illegally often prefer the informal health care, hoping to stay out of sight of immigration officials.

Yet, these so-called alternative medicines are also attracting a growing native-born American audience, turning alternative medicine into a trend fueling billions of dollars in annual sales nationwide and garnering attention from Western medical institutions.

"People tend to talk to other people. So, I get a lot of people by word of mouth," said George Mingins, one of about three dozen licensed acupuncturists working in the region. Mingins, who trained at the New England School of **Acupuncture** in Watertown, has an office in the Gateway Center in Methuen, one of a growing number of centers capitalizing on the demand for "alternative" therapies.

Acupuncture, the most mainstream of alternative therapies, is advertised in the Yellow Pages and covered by some medical insurance. Yet, insurance companies do not recognize most other folk remedies or therapies, which cost about \$50 per session.

Many patients are drawn to these therapies after conventional medicine has provided little relief for everything from migraine headaches to fatigue to cancer or AIDS, practitioners and patients say.

While Western medicine largely separates physical, mental and emotional realms, Asian and Hispanic traditions consider all three -- and spirituality -- inseparable.

Treatment usually starts with a series of questions that **help** the health care providers gain a broad picture of the patient's life, habits and health. While some folk practitioners say one only needs to believe in the results of treatment, traditions such as Santeria revolve around faith.

"It is all part of the whole. I treat the spiritual as much as the physical," said Santeria priest Jose Melendez, who owns the Broadway Street Botanica Coqui in Lowell. His customers seek **help** with family problems and illness, to calm nerves, dispel evil influences and seek good luck, said Melendez. His shop is filled with candles, potions and diet supplements, including an impressive selection of good luck perfumes, bearing names like Siete Gotas de la Buena Suerte (Seven Drops of Good Luck).k root in the Caribbean during slave times.

"I did not learn this in any book. It is a God-given gift," said Melendez, who grew up in Puerto Rico. At age 12, he said he became aware of his gift and later apprenticed with elder Santeros on the island, where the religion has stayed alive through oral tradition for hundreds of years.

Academics who study the religion compare Santeros to social workers and psychotherapists for the broad services they provide. Yet, consultas, the initial interviews, always start with prayer, said Melendez.

"Unless the person has faith in God, I **can** do nothing," Melendez said. Then, he asks questions and offers both spiritual and practical advice. The consulta costs \$20 and clients will usually purchase objects such as candles, perfumes, baths and religious amulets.

Like other botanicas, Coqui is also an informal gathering spot. Neighbors drift in and out. Some, like Ismenia Figueroa, pick up herbs and brewing instructions for a dark yellow tea that Melendez assures her will **help** with her influenza symptoms.

"I prefer this to going to the doctor's office," said Figueroa, a Lowell resident, who has used the medicine all her life.

Yet, Melendez and the other practitioners interviewed said their remedies **can** complement but not replace Western medicine.

According to the the state's Board of Registration in Medicine, alternative practitioners are not licensed to diagnose disease.

While they hail from different traditions, many Chinese treatment centers, Latino botanicas and health food stores sell the same herbal products. Take the offerings of naturopathic doctor Alcibiades Acosta: he carries herbs like una de gata (cat claw), also available at Melendez's botanica. Both Melendez and Acosta sell ginseng, which is a staple of Chinese medicine.

Acosta, who works out of the Centro de Nutricion y Terapias Naturales (Nutrition and Natural Therapies Center) on Essex Street in Lawrence, combines American and Latino traditions. He showcases products and the philosophy available at any number of American natural products stores and incorporates remedies derived from plants, roots, tree bark and other natural elements throughout Latin America.

"The use of natural remedies and changes in our eating habits **can** have a tremendous effect" on health, said Acosta.

The approach worked for Maria Chavez of West Roxbury, who had her first migraine at age 6. Thirty-three years and countless Western cures later, the headaches had become so severe and frequent Chavez said she was missing school and work so much that "I thought I was going to be disabled."

At the urging of friends, she went to see Acosta and took his advise, cleansing her system with enemas and eliminating white flour, preservatives, alcohol and other items from her diet. Four years later, her headaches have become infrequent and less severe, allowing her to finish her training and purchase the Brookline beauty salon where she had worked, she said.

Internist Diana Han said the number of patients using herb and other alternative treatments has risen in the last five years. She supports such a hybrid approach to health care if patients practice moderation and seek the guidance of a knowledgeable herbalist.

"I have seen it be quite beneficial for patients who suffer from the cough and the cold as well as chronic pain syndrome," said Han, an internist at Emerson Practice Associate a satellite health center in Westford run by Emerson Hospital. Patients who do not respond to conventional pain killers have found relief using herbal products, and women going through menopause have told her about good experiences with products such as evening primrose oil, she said.

"There is very much a trend now and almost a fad in using herbal therapies," Han said.

Roy Steinman, an obstetrician who lives in Chelmsford, stands by Chinese massage. He received treatment at Rady Mom's Lowell shop for golf elbow that had plagued him for two years, growing so serious he could not shake hands and had scheduled surgery to correct the problem. Yet, after eight months of "Tui Na" massage, his condition improved and he canceled surgery.

"There is not a doubt in my mind that it really works," said Steinman, who expressed relief at avoiding surgery. But, he pointed out that the therapy is not for the faint of heart. He said the treatments were strenuous and his elbow was often swollen and red on the day after sessions.

Another client of Mom's, Pam Sage, a 53-year-old Pepperell resident, comes to Lowell for treatments that **help** control manic-depression. She also sees a medical doctor and psychoanalyst and takes prescription drugs to keep the chemicals in her brain in balance. Her psychoanalyst supports the alternative treatments, Sage said.

"I have found that this treatment is the best to maintain a balance," said Sage, who has given up chiropractic and **acupuncture** treatments to pursue massage therapy in the past year.

Mom performs traditional Chinese massages that are thousands of years older than the better-known **acupuncture**. Tui Na and **Qi** Gong are hands-on therapy that works the body's muscles and joints to reinvigorate the body by getting its energy flowing.

Little consensus exists even among immigrants whose ancestors developed the ancient practices. Ratha Paul Yem, who came to Lowell from Cambodia, said many younger immigrants prefer Western medicine.

"We, the younger generation, are getting away from" the folk ways, he said. In part, because herbal teas and elixirs "taste awful." While acupressure massages are heavenly for some people, Yem likened them to a serious beating.

"You end up with bruises all over your body," said Yem, who would rather take two aspirin and call the doctor in the morning

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