

Increasingly turning to complementary medicine, insurance usually doesn't cover it

ing," says J.P. Wieske, state affairs director for the Council for Affordable Health Insurance. "But the simple reality is that insurance companies need to rely on studies to see what on a population basis will be effective. Right now, radiation is the only treatment that has been shown to be effective for cancer. When you have a third-party payment system, you have to make decisions on effective treatments. You cannot make them on a case-by-case basis. I understand that it doesn't feel like a good decision, and yet when you look at the system, this is what you get."

Until very recently, much of the medicine is much better known around the world for chiropractic care than trols, thanks to the Gonstead Clinic, founded in 1939 by chiropractic pioneer Dr. Clarence Gonstead. The area's biggest medical clinics, including UW Health, Meriter, and Dean, now proudly tout their various alternative services.

In 2006, nearly four out of 10 Americans used CAM treatments, spending \$33.9 billion on them, according to a survey conducted by the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, an arm of the National Institutes of Health. Some seek relief from such life-threatening illnesses as cancer and HIV. Others use the treatments as preventive medicine. But many rely on holistic treatments to manage chronic conditions — including diabetes, obesity, infertility, back pain and headaches — that their regular doctors and Western medicine can't fix.

—Bonnie Horrigan, spokeswoman,
The Bravewell Collaborative

cal establishment dismissed alternative medicine as wacky and downright dangerous: In 1963, the American Medical Association even formed a "Committee on Quackery" aimed at shutting down chiropractors. But times have changed. Alternative therapies are gaining converts, even among the doctors who once shunned them, as evidenced by new names that reflect this new partnership: complementary and alternative medicine (CAM), and integrative medicine. The Midwest lags behind the coasts, but Madison's Yellow Pages lists close to 20 acupuncture providers — up from a handful just a decade ago — and more than 50 massage providers.

The once-scorned chiropractors are abundant, too, with more than 150 in the Madison area. Cari's hometown, Mount

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"I was driven to try acupuncture out of desperation. I went to 16 doctors and specialists, and none of them knew how to help me," says Holly Fentress, 62, a Madison social worker who suffered from fibromyalgia. Fentriss says this soft tissue pain condition kept her from sitting down, walking in the mall or lifting her arms to change a light bulb. She scraped together \$65 once or twice a week for acupuncture sessions. Today, she says, she is cured. "I would have gotten better a lot sooner if my insurance had just paid for it instead of wasting money on me floundering around," she says. "I don't know why they don't pay for it — it's one of the oldest medicines in the world."

GHC covers complementary therapies

Group Health Cooperative of Southwestern Wisconsin is the only local carrier that offers alternative medicine as part of its standard health insurance benefits. About half of its 62,000 members use the benefits, which pay 50 percent of the bills up to \$750 for an array of holistic therapies and services.

GHC opened its Complementary Medicine and Wellness Center at its Sauk Trails Clinic in January 2005 after a local doctor argued the clinic would be an innovative way to help members and might also result in cost savings for pharmacy drugs and specialty care.

Today, the program has expanded into three other clinics and doubled the number of providers. Forty-five complementary medicine providers offer acupuncture, massage, craniosacral massage, Reiki and naturopathic medicine. Members also can see someone called a cancer guide and learn meditation, tai chi and yoga.

Other local insurance companies argue that such coverage is a luxury and that even if they do invest in benefits to promote their clients' health and wellness, there is no guarantee that they will profit directly since the average client ends up switching insurance coverage every few years.

While GHC does not yet have supporting data, Della Copp, its marketing manager, says officials believe the holistic services will reduce the money the health cooperative pays out for prescription drugs. The company has reaped other benefits, Copp says. Last year, GHC was rated in the top 10 of the country's health plans in U.S. News & World Report's annual survey of consumer satisfaction and success in preventing and treating illness.

— Shawn Doherty