Alternative (integrative) medicine and different attitudes in a socio-cultural context in Hungary

Commentary

The use of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) is becoming more common, while the adult population in the USA can reach 72% and 86% in Europe. Although we do not have a recent representative of alternative medicine use, Závecz Research in Hungary measured last year’s attitudes towards alternative (complementary) medicine. According to the findings, most Hungarians consider alternative forms of medicine to be effective and believe that most illnesses are of a spiritual origin. The astonishing data are worth reading in a socio-cultural context. Our globalizing world is characterized by virtually unlimited flow of information, and often contradictory information is produced from countless sources. The information also covers health issues, and the patient is orienting it on what it believes to be a reliable source of information. Although the dominance of biomedicine is unquestionable, it is located in a multicultural health market where not only products and services compete, but also world views and ways of thinking. The world’s images and manners that are formerly homogenous (generated by centralized cultural forces) become more and more heterogeneous (hybrid, personalized), the individual assembles his world view with a kind of “cultural fragmentation”.

It is a Western phenomenon, but Hungary is characterized by mistrust of some social institutions. Personal experience, however, has been revalued in many areas of life, so the individual and the other experienced have become the primary source of authenticity. As the recently Závecz research reveals, loss of confidence also affects healthcare: with the statement that “Large pharmaceutical companies are making impossible cheap and natural remedies that threaten their profits” nearly 70% of respondents “completely” or “more agree”. On the one hand, it shows that society sees the pharmaceutical industry as profit-oriented and interest-conscious, and on the other hand that in the public sphere the “natural” and the drug become cultural opposites. The “natural” popular marketing keyword that sells a wide range of products (meals, cosmetics, etc.). The “natural” cultural opposite is the “chemical” and “toxin” that 75% of the Hungarians think that purification from them means “the key to health”. How can the market success of “detoxification” be explained? This attitude is one of the modern health worries, just like food additives and “electrophoresis”. According to many, consumer society products and technology means “intoxicants” accumulate in the human body leading to illness. “Detoxification” calls for an already existing fear (“the world in which I live, not pure”), and a desire to purify a widespread and multifaceted expression.

The “natural” cultural synonyms are “bio”, “eco”, “ancient”, “traditional”, which, among other things, are reflected in nutritional preferences (chemical-free food) and in diets (such as paleoliths). The “natural” evokes a romantic past, which is “still clear”, so reliable and healthy. The apple juice produced in the small family business is “more delicious” than its large-scale equivalent; grandmother’s cake is certainly free from harmful preservatives and food additives. Thus, traditional cure is more reliable, not only because of its “ancient” nature, but because it is “natural” as it stimulates the “self-healing mechanisms” of the body. Often, the counterpole for these is the drug that is the cultural content of “chemicals”, “synthetic” and “toxin”. The subjective judgment of the effectiveness of a cure can also be interpreted in a socio-cultural context. In Závecz’s research, “There are many alternative therapeutic methods that are more effective than official medicine”, 58.6% of respondents agree. The result is partly explained by the above cultural phenomena and that efficiency can be defined in many ways. How effective is a cure and its measurable effectiveness? How important is the evidence-based outcome for the patient? On the one hand, since conventional medicine has a dominant role in socialization, most users of alternative medicine have an explicit or implicit desire for science to validate the form of treatment it uses, whatever it is “esoteric”. On the other hand, evidence-based methods represent a stringent expectation and procedural system that question many of the perceived manifestations of the phenomenon of the ordinary person and thus their existence. The assessment of the effectiveness of a cure also depends on the etiology that the individual’s somatic problem is attributed to. According to Závecz data, 77% of Hungarians agree that “Most of the illnesses are of spiritual origin and should be treated.” If someone attributes their illness to spiritual causes, Western treatment will not be effective, as it does not “cause”, it is merely “symptomatic treatment”. This etiology can be explained by the fact that the patient attempts to overcome the control loss during a physical illness by placing more emphasis on his more controllable psychological and social domains. Psychosocial etiology, however, is not new and more widespread than we would think: if we look at the whole of cultures, the goal of biomedicine is to rationalize the biological domain from other areas of life. It is much more common for cultures to place physical illness in the same frame of reference than illness, accident, and social problems. Man tries to understand the phenomena affecting him, as if he is left without meaning, leads to control loss. In many cases, alternative (complementary) medicine is a cultural system that offers a cure that is in line with a patient’s existing world view or offers a new framework for the conversion of its illness and world.

Acknowledgements

None.

Conflict of interest

Author declares that there is no conflict of interest.
References


