Alternative medicine use by MS patients mapped

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A major Nordic research project involving researchers from the University of Copenhagen has, for the first time ever, mapped the use of alternative treatment among multiple sclerosis patients - knowledge which is important for patients with chronic disease and the way in which society meets them.

People with multiple sclerosis (MS) often use alternative treatments such as dietary supplements, acupuncture and herbal medicine to facilitate their lives with this chronic disease. This is the result of a new study of how MS patients use both conventional and alternative treatments which has been carried out by researchers from five Nordic countries. The results have been published in two scientific journals, the *Scandinavian Journal of Public Health and Autoimmune Diseases*.

"What we see is that patients do not usually use alternative treatments for treating symptoms, but as a preventative and strengthening element," says Lasse Skovgaard, industrial PhD candidate from the Faculty of Health and Medical Sciences and the Danish Multiple Sclerosis Society, who has been involved in conducting the questionnaire-based study among 3,800 people with MS in Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland and Iceland.

Multiple sclerosis is a chronic disease which attacks the central nervous system, and which can lead to a loss of mobility and sight. Denmark is one of the countries with the highest incidence of the disease worldwide, with approx. 12,500 MS patients. At the same time, the number of MS

patients in the West is increasing, posing considerable challenges in respect of treatment, prevention and rehabilitation.

Access to knowledge bank

Together with researchers from the five other Nordic countries, Lasse Skovgaard has spent three years gathering the new data, and he is delighted at what it offers:

"Within the field of health research, it is often a question of studying the extent to which a particular type of drug affects a particular symptom. However, it is equally as important to look at how people with a chronic disease, for example, use different treatments to cope with their situation. Here, MS patients offer valuable experience. Their experiences constitute a knowledge bank which we must access and learn from," he says.

Lasse Skovgaard draws attention to the significance of this new knowledge because, if people with chronic disease are better able to manage their lives, it can potentially save society large sums of money.

"There is a lot of talk about 'self-care competence', in other words patients helping themselves to get their lives to function. Here, many people with a chronic disease find they benefit from using alternative treatments, so we should not ignore this possibility," says Lasse Skovgaard.

At the same time, he emphasises that knowing more about why patients choose particular treatments is important in relation to improving patient safety because of the possible risks involved in combining conventional and alternative medicine.

Growing use of alternative treatments

According to the latest Health and Sickness Study from the Danish National Institute of Public Health (NIPH) in 2010, one in four Danes say that they have tried one or more types of alternative treatments within the past twelve months. Among MS patients, the use of alternative medicine has been growing steadily over the past fifteen years. In the researchers' latest study, more than half of the respondents say that they either combine conventional and alternative medicine or only use alternative medicine.

"We cannot ignore the fact that people with chronic disease use alternative treatments to a considerable extent, and that many of them seem to benefit from doing so. It doesn't help to only judge this from a medical point of view or say that alternative treatments are nonsense – rather, we must try to understand it," says Lasse Skovgaard.

Highly qualified women top the list

The study shows that, among MS patients using alternative treatments, there is a significantly bigger proportion of people with a high level of education compared to those who do not use alternative treatments. There is also a larger proportion of highly paid people and of younger women.

"Some critics are of the opinion that when alternative treatments are so popular, it is because they appeal to naïve people looking for a miraculous cure. But our results indicate that it is primarily the well-educated segment that is subscribing to alternative treatments. And that using alternative treatments is part of a lifestyle choice," says Lasse Skovgaard.

He hopes that the new knowledge will improve communication regarding how the chronically ill use alternative treatments in combination with conventional medicine:

"We see that so many people are combining conventional medicine with alternative treatment that it should be taken seriously by the health service. Until now, there hasn't been much focus on the doctor-patient dialogue in relation to the alternative methods used by the chronically ill to manage their lives," says Lasse Skovgaard. He says that the research group is continuing to analyse the results and, among other things, is conducting several interview studies based on the results of the questionnaires. The interview studies will, for example, provide additional knowledge on how patients perceive the risks associated with using alternative medicine and explore why some patients turn their backs completely on conventional medicine.

More information: sjp.sagepub.com/content/early/ … 403494813481646.full

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