

Title of Paper: What makes complementary medicine "alternative"? Part 2

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Abstract:

Objective: Using homeopathy as an example, we will explore the claims of alternative medicine, the patient rationale for use and the logical errors commonly made in choosing them.. We also wish to explore the physician's role in balancing the family's cultural, religious and medical expectations with the rights of the child to the best available evidence-based treatments.

Case:

2 year old Asian female, presenting at 14 months with ESRF of unknown aetiology, marked failure to thrive and severe feed intolerance with persistent eosinophilia. From the family's perspective, treatment with peritoneal dialysis, intensive dietetic input, hydrolysed formulae and the standard medications for CKD, although life saving have not resulted in their daughter "getting better". This family sought alternative therapies including herbal, homeopathic and electromagnetic therapies from a family friend. This also led the family to believe that the standard medications were poisonous and inhibiting their daughter's renal recovery. The alternative therapist refused to continue with their treatments unless the family relinquished erythropoietin and the other standard therapies. Perilous drops in haemoglobin and the refusal of erythropoietin have led to safeguarding and child protection issues.

Discussion:

Alternative therapies such as homeopathy claim a rich historical pedigree and often change their claims to suit a modern healthcare setting. Innumerable RCTs and meta-analyses have concluded that homeopathy and other alternative therapies are no better than placebo and yet patients and families rally to their cause. The physician questioning their claims is often derided as an elitist, empiricist and closed-minded. What are the logical errors made by claimants and families using alternative therapies? How do we as physicians manage the psychological aspects and help our patients and families make informed, evidence-based decisions? How do we balance the ethics of patient centred treatment when so many peripheral players have contrary views?

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