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Kate Chatfield

Traditional
and Complementary
Medicines: Are they Ethical
for Humans, Animals
and the Environment?

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Foreword

Ethical Issues in Traditional and Complementary Medicines—The Need for a Calm Assessment

Some topics fire argumentative tension like no others. If this tension is expressed through vigorous public debates aiming for a consensus, a major benefit for society can be achieved. If this tension is expressed through frenzied, angry argumentation, it can be harmful to society. Recent examples include the Brexit debate in the UK and the refugee debate in Continental Europe.

A longstanding debate that is partly characterized by angry rather than vigorous discussion is the topic of ethical issues in traditional and complementary medicine (T&CM). For instance, an academic article entitled “Use of Alternative Medicine for Cancer and Its Impact on Survival” (Johnson 2018) is disseminated as “Alternative medicine kills cancer patients” (Pomeroy 2017).

The potential for ethical issues is vast, from profiteering by unscrupulous providers of allegedly helpful complementary therapies to toxic harm through herbs. Yet, each scandal could be matched by multiple numbers of similar scandals in conventional medicine without the same incitement of anger. Profiteering from counterfeit malaria drugs in selected countries in Sub-Saharan Africa alone leads to around 125,000 deaths of children under 5 per year (Renschler 2015). An estimated 66 million potentially clinically significant medication errors occur in the UK each year (Elliot et al. 2018). Hence, it is not as though one side of the debate was free from major ethical challenges.

What is needed is a calm assessment of the issues, informed by considerable expertise and an analytical perspective. This brave assignment is taken on by Kate Chatfield and taken on successfully. Chatfield untangles the web of angry and reasoned positions on ethical issues in T&CM and comes to valuable conclusions.

Conventional medicine and T&CM can both be practised ethically and unethically. They are both responsible for major adverse effects in humans, detrimental impacts upon the environment, as well as harm and suffering for animals, where conventional medicine fares much better than T&CM is on regulation. It is much

more difficult to be an unethical conventional health practitioner than to be an unethical T&CM practitioner. That is because regulation helps ensure ethical conduct. Chatfield therefore appeals to regulators to close gaps. For instance, the availability of unlicensed, unregulated and potentially lethal T&CM medications via the Internet requires global attention and cooperation.

At the same time, some comparisons weigh in favour of T&CM, which fares much better than conventional health care on environmental impact. As Chatfield shows, the current provision of conventional medicine is vastly more damaging on the planet than the provision of most complementary medicines in terms of energy use, reliance upon oil and pollution of the environment.

In the conclusion of her book, Chatfield calls for a resilience toolkit. When health is seen as an ability to adapt to physical, mental and social challenges, in other words, resilience, prevention becomes an imperative. To leave T&CM outside of this toolkit, in a world where, for many, it serves as the only form accessible health care, would be unethical.

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