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East Supplements West  
Complementary and Western medicine rub more than just shoulders

By Amanda Baltazar



Esthetician Joan Barlow stands on the threshold between her skin care clinic and garden.

*Let's satisfy the pessimists first: Despite being one of the more progressive states as far as this is concerned, insurance companies in Washington are still only doing what seems to be the minimum to ensure people are covered to visit alternate practitioners.*

*On the flip side, however, more and more people are turning to alternative medicine – in droves, it seems – and they're taking a more proactive stance towards their health.*

*Alternative medicine is actually best described as complementary medicine. It is not intended to replace Western doctors and the powerful drugs they prescribe. Rather, it is meant to complement it, to fill in the holes, and to help relieve pain and disease that Western practices can't.*

*Joan Barlow is the owner of Native Springs, a natural skin care clinic and store in La Conner. "The borders between traditional and alternative medicine will slowly fade away," she explains, "and all medicine may simply become integrative, treating the whole person rather than just their symptoms."*

*"There's no liability from trying something more natural, more gentle before using Western drugs," says Ryan Vos, owner of White Jade Acupuncture, which has locations in Freeland and Kirkland. "It can mean people need fewer drugs, and therefore there's less toxicity and fewer side effects."*

*Complementary medicine runs the gamut from the well-known chiropractic and*

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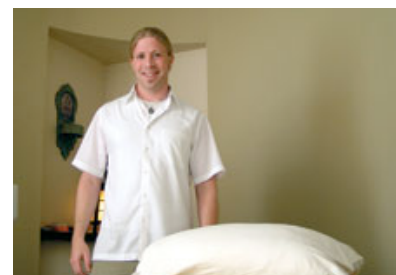
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acupuncture, to the lesser known: Ayurveda, medical massage, Bowenwork, medical facials and reflexology, to name just a few therapies. There's even a medical psychic in the Pacific Northwest, who declined to be interviewed for this story, who says she can see your problems and cure them with her thoughts. More people are turning to these forms of medicine, as a way to both solve problems and prevent future ones from happening.

"It's a grassroots movement," says Judy Hammer, a medical massage therapist in Anacortes, "but it is happening."

#### Consumers taking control

Complementary medicine treats not just the symptoms but it treats the body in a holistic way, says Shan Sparling, owner of Garden Oasis Massage in Bellingham. Her practice exclusively treats women mentally, spiritually, emotionally, and actively participates in the body's healing in an integral way.

"People used to see their doctor as a god, and say 'fix me.' They didn't take responsibility for their own health, but now they're starting to," she says.

Consumers are becoming more interested in simple practical treatments for common health concerns, says Barlow. "Taking control of your own health and having the intention of wellness is now the norm."

Barlow's business treats people suffering from problems such as rosacea, eczema, psoriasis and adult acne. She also treats babies and toddlers with rashes, teenagers with hormone-related acne, and pregnant women with hormonal breakouts. And, she gives facials just to keep people's skin in good shape. Her practice uses a special calcium-bentonite clay from Worland, Wyo., that's rich in minerals that penetrate the skin and allow the dead cells to roll away. Other clays do not penetrate the skin as deeply.

Around 60 percent of Sparling's patients are suffering the effects of stress. "It's slow poison to your system," she explains. "If you don't get a let-up from stress your body remains locked in that stress system." Other problems often caused by stress are back and neck pain, headaches, insomnia and pregnancy pain.

The good news is that the tide is starting to turn and more than half of her clients come to Sparling to prevent future pain.

She treats people of all ages, but particularly baby boomers, who see their parents struggle with health issues and feel there has to be a better way, she explains.

"That is simply the intention: A better, healthy quality of life."

That Judy Hammer's medical massage business in Anacortes is generally booked two months out is testament to the need for these kinds of services in the Pacific Northwest. "People who come to me are desperate," she says. "They've tried everything else – even other alternative therapies."

Hammer's business is different to many in that she literally starts from the ground up – examining peoples' feet, which give away so much, she explains. By doing this, Hammer gets deep into the cause of the problem, rather than treating the symptoms, she explains.

She looks at the entire body to address the source of a person's pain, and often refers them to someone else if massage won't help them. A common referral is to a podiatrist, because many problems can simply be eased by orthotics (shoe inserts that can realign a person's body by correcting foot problems).

#### Educating clients builds business

One of the biggest facets of working in complementary medicine is being an educator.

You have to coach clients, says Barlow, because if they don't follow the plan, they will not see results. In today's instantaneous world, people want immediate results, which are not possible. Although small, encouraging, positive results can often be seen daily, she said.

"Nobody in the U.S. has the time to stop and educate themselves, but if they would slow down and learn, they'd get angry at how manipulated they've been by doctors," says Hammer. "Our culture is a fix-it-now, quick culture."



Ryan Vos of White Jade Acupuncture offers an alternative to Western drugs, which means less toxicity and side effects.

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*People today are more open to being educated, says Sparling. They ask more questions and want to know how to look after their health, and look at the whole picture – diet, exercise and yoga, among others. However, she does admit that we in the Pacific Northwest are more progressive than in many other parts of the country. It is happening in the places you wouldn't expect, she explains – just more slowly.*

*Nancy Clark practices Bowenwork in La Conner and Marysville. Her clients generally come to her first because they have a problem, "but when they get educated and see results they come back for tune-ups because they're out of balance."*

*Educating people is difficult, she explains. "I want to convince people, but you can't do that. So I have to keep [myself] educated." The more she keeps up with new discoveries, she says, the more comfortable she is educating others.*

*Education is particularly important for Kathie Pedersen, a reflexologist in Stanwood, because most people are unsure about reflexology, she says.*

*"So many people, until they have it done, don't really believe in it. It stimulates peoples' organs. The biggest problem is the skepticism of people; they are so brainwashed by Western medicine," she says.*

*Our feet constitute 2 percent of our body, she explains, but they carry 98 percent of it. So much of this, she says, is because people wear the wrong shoes. "When your shoes are wrong, your whole body is wrong."*

*"The more educated consumers are, the more they've read up on acupuncture and realize it treats more than pain," says Vos. Despite this, people generally come to him for problems they already have, "which reflects the world we live in – it's more a sick care model than health care."*

*Once people have come in and found it's not scary being poked with needles, they are more likely to come back, even if it's just once a month for a tune-up. "This also gives me the chance to educate them. It's very empowering because people can learn how to play an active role in their health."*

*"As people become more educated," says Vos, "they'll see more benefit to this. They will maybe use it more as a front-line medicine and if they find they need something stronger, then go to Western medicine."*

*Educating clients can only help everyone, and may lead to future business, since this industry operates on word-of-mouth and referrals.*

### *Dream job*

*In spite of the rigorous education part of complementary medicine, working in this field is a dream job for most people. Practitioners can mostly make their own hours, often work out of their home, be surrounded by calm – and perhaps, most importantly, help other people.*

*"I really love being in a position to help people with their health, sending clients out the door pain-free and blissed out," points out Sparling. "And anything you can do to positively affect someone's wellbeing will ripple out and affect others." Nancy Clark is one of just 10 people in the Northwest who practice Bowenwork, a therapy that relies on very light touch. It's based on the principle that our bodies are self-healing, and with the right stimulation can return to a healthy state.*

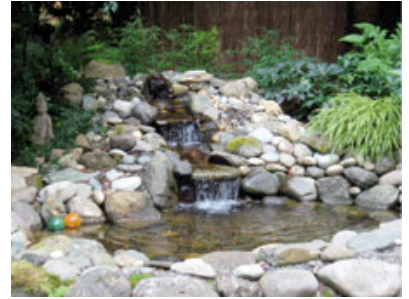
*"People are very skeptical about light touch but it's about feeling it," she explains. "It's light and gentle work but it's very powerful. It's about understanding how it affects the muscular system, the neuromuscular system and the nervous system.*

*"Many of us are in survival mode from our go-go-go lives and the body can't heal when it's in that mode." But when she sees the light bulb go off in people's heads, and sees they don't have pain any more, it's all worth it, she says. "It's about when people are thrilled."*

*Many of these practitioners have set up their own business after being caught in the rat race themselves. Having experienced the wonders complementary medicine could do for them, they decided to ditch the high-powered life for a world of peace.*

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Massage therapist Shan Sparling, along with her husband, landscaped the garden for which her business, Garden Oasis Massage, is named.



Shan Sparling left a corporate job to become a massage therapist.

*Sparling's former job was in Seattle, in the aerospace and auto industry. As she was growing tired of the stress, she started going to school for massage. "I really saw first-hand how I could manage stress," she explains.*

*After doing both jobs simultaneously for some years, she set up Garden Oasis Massage out of her home. As its name promises, Sparling's garden is a big part of the practice. "Atmosphere is a big part of it and it hits all the senses," she says. "I try to create an atmosphere so when people come to me, they feel like they've had a mini retreat. I want to nurture their spirit and their mind, and let them feel like they've done something good for themselves."*

*A former occupational therapist, Hammer was almost forced to change fields when President Bill Clinton slashed the budget for that occupational therapy. But she is thrilled with her new career in massage, and says her former medical knowledge translates to it perfectly.*

*Juliet Wade's yoga practice led her to Ayurveda and work at the Ayurvedic Health Center in Bellingham. She started practicing it in 1996 and was passionate about it from the first.*

*"The sister sciences of yoga and Ayurveda are inextricably linked and have complemented and enhanced each other since their inceptions," she says. "While practicing one without the other is beneficial, it is similar to eating a nutritious diet without exercising – an incomplete approach to health. The synergistic union of yoga and Ayurveda brings a holistic approach."*

#### *Insurance still a stumbling block*

*You've heard the good news; unfortunately, there's also the bad.*

*Despite the enthusiastic response to the field of complementary medicine, it won't really take off until health insurance companies start recognizing its benefits and properly reimbursing clients for services they receive.*

*"We are held captive to the time limits insurance companies give us," says Hammer, explaining that doctors can't assess patients in the time allotted to them, so instead they take the short route and prescribe a pill. "They're robots caught up in the insurance wheel." Around 80 percent of Hammer's patients are covered by insurance, but it's not always adequate, she explains.*

*Washington state insurance providers must recognize complementary medicine, according to Rod Bring, a principal with Employee Benefits Planning in Mount Vernon. "It's probably just minimally covered," he says, adding that a naturopath might be covered, but the herbs and tinctures probably aren't. Some insurance companies limit the number of visits a person can make per year, or they might have to make a certain deductible before insurance kicks in.*

*The reason behind this is largely because complementary medicine practitioners aren't recognized, he says, but it's also about cost-containment on the part of the insurers. "I think they've gone as far as they can go, and are allowed to go." Many alternative medicine modalities are based on disease prevention, including diet and nutrition, supplement therapy and relaxation techniques. Others, like massage and bodywork, eliminate or reduce a patient's need for pain medication or even surgery, says Barlow. "Why wouldn't insurance companies be willing to shell out a small amount of money for preventative measures that would end up saving money in the long term?"*

*All of Barlow's clients pay out of pocket because her work is not recognized by insurance companies. She offers money-saving coupons, however, and specials throughout the year such as half-price facial gift certificates. "Some of my clients buy the whole year ahead at half price, then come in once a month with the gift certificate that has been pre-paid," she says. "Smart shoppers!"*

*Barlow is hopeful for change. "I think [insurance] will be gradual like chiropractic. That changed [because of] more people making their requests known. It's slow change and will continue to be, but people like me, baby boomers, are pushing for a change."*

*Sparling is also not covered by any type of insurance. "But I find that people care enough about their health that they'll come anyway," she points out.*

*“The most difficult thing is the way healthcare is looked at and the way people base medicine around disease rather than prevention,” said Vos. “We need a healthcare system that recognizes the benefits of acupuncture for everything from stress to fertility, but insurance is basing what they reimburse on what medical research shows, and medical research is based on a sickness system, so it’s biased.”*

*Using the Western style of research to prove or disprove what complementary medicine does is very difficult, he explains, so insurance has a very difficult time figuring out what to reimburse.*

*“We have come a long way with working with insurance, but there’s still a long way to go,” he adds. With the current state of insurance plans, Vos can only treat certain aspects of what’s wrong with his patients if they want to be reimbursed, and some companies make his customers spend a certain deductible before they cover it.*

*A possible alternative is available to consumers, according to Bring: Health Savings Accounts (HSAs). Employees can pay into these with pre-tax dollars and they cover almost everything but cosmetic surgery and herbs. However, he says, they typically have huge deductibles. “They’re gaining traction with employers. Most insurance companies offer them and they provide a lot greater freedom, so we’re seeing a big interest in them.”*

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