

Muslim Women's Thoughts on Alternative Medicine

2020/2021

MWC Think + Do Tank Report

Background

The way we do research to inform policy isn't working. Today, most community based/'led' research is done through collaborations between large science or specialist research institutes partnering with local organisations beyond their institutions. Whilst this is an attempt to enrich the quality of research and of bringing wider social benefits, it still lacks the true representation of the communities they are trying to help. Where such partnerships are formed the experiences are not always productive or conducive to drawing on the knowledge and expertise of all participants, as they remain the subject not the co-authors of the research.

There is a need for a process that places these individuals and communities as the authors of research that considers the issues they face; and develops practical responses and recommendations from the ground up. There is a need for a radical shift and movement in how authentic data and insights are collected from women of Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds.

In response MWC have developed an approach that focuses on the delivery of authentic and appropriate research to create better policy and practice that drive practical solutions that address women's health and wellbeing.

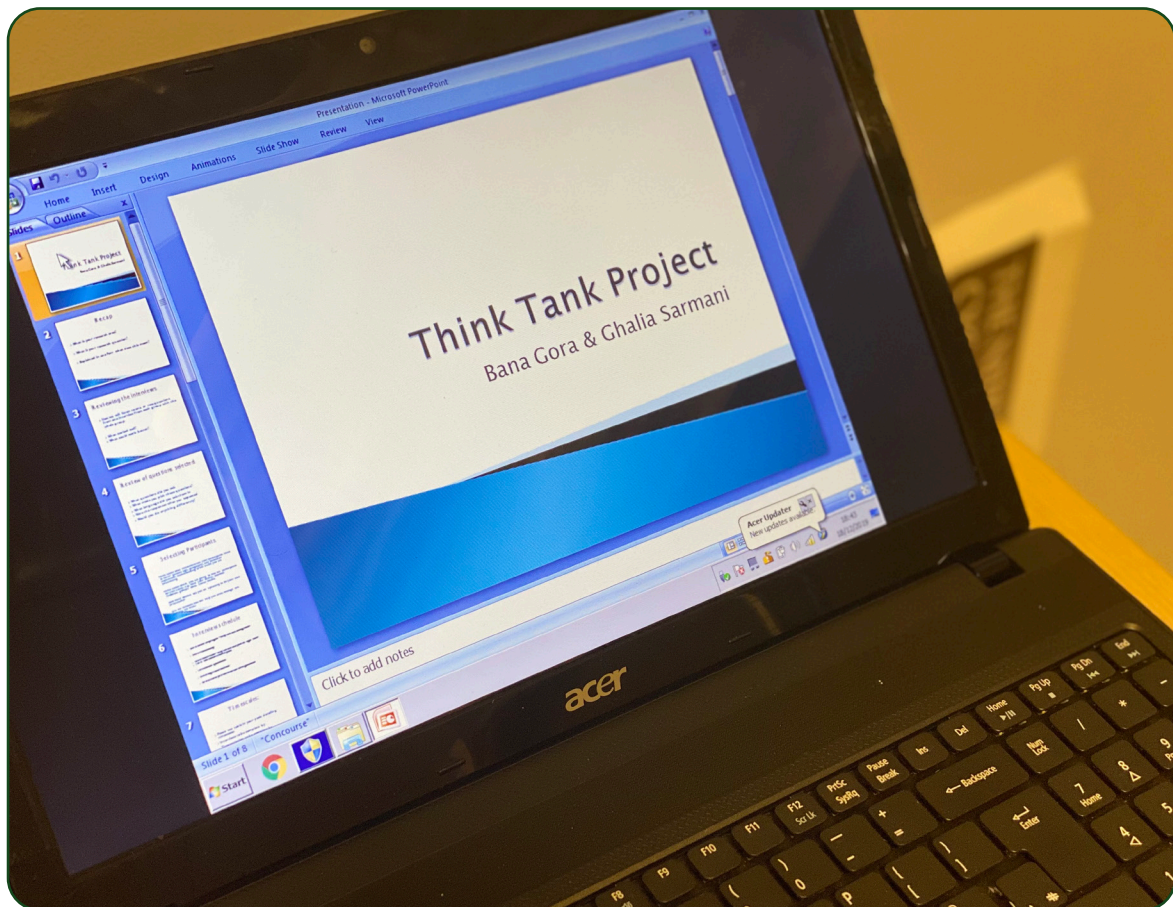
Think + Do Tank

With the support of Wellcome Trust, Smallwood Trust & Friends Provident Foundation, we hope to reverse the current trend of Muslim males and non-Muslims researching and advocating on behalf of Muslim women, especially regarding issues of health, wellbeing and bioscience.

Our approach will straddle the 'Think + Do Tank' between both policy and beneficiaries (Muslim Women) and will offer authentic insight and appropriate solutions, as it will be led by the beneficiaries. We focus on the relevance, credibility, legitimacy and utility of the research we do, ensuring that we position our research for use.

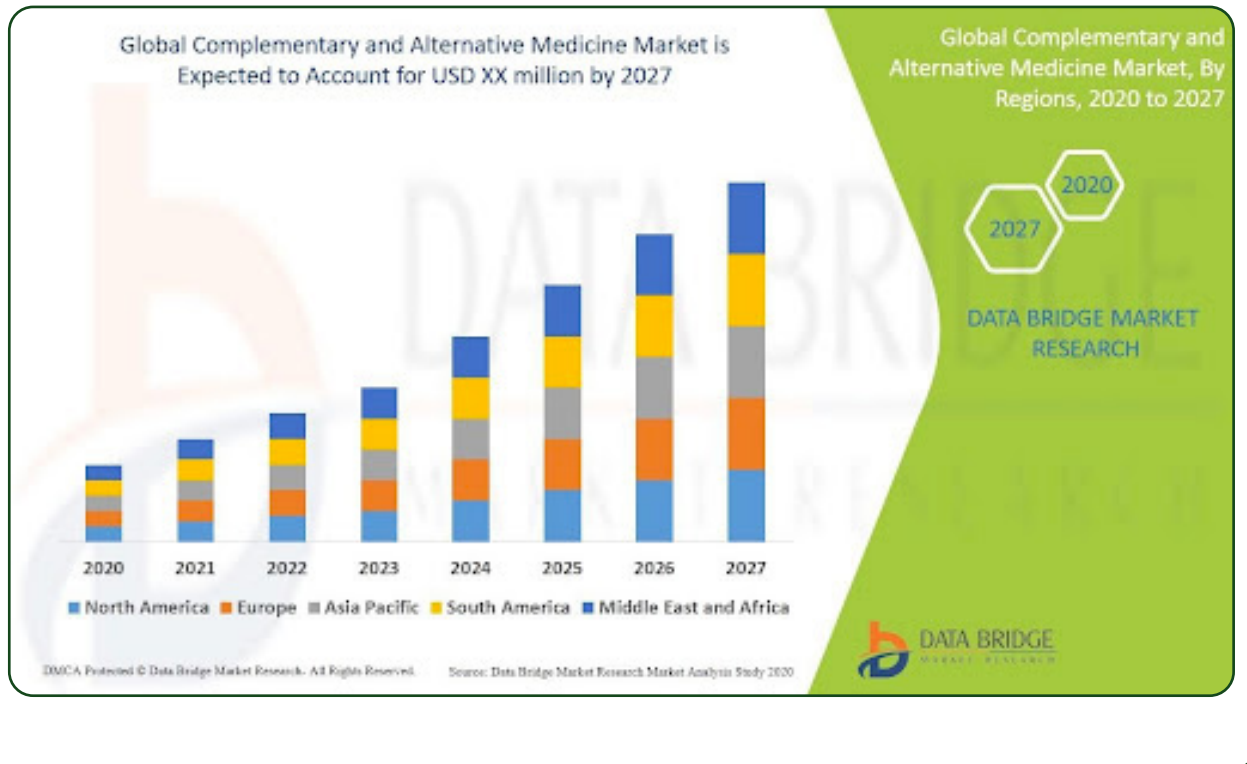
We focus on Muslim Women from Bradford and surrounding areas. Within this group there is a climate of misogyny and patriarchy fuelled by public stereotyping and male-dominated interpretations of women's roles and positions. In short, society is denying these women their ability to think and act independently or contribute to the creation of health, wellbeing and bio-science policies and practices that affect them and their community.

For example, Muslim women have not been engaged as contributors to research and policy reflective of them. It seems that most research is a male bastion, which undermines their effectiveness and puts them at a disadvantage and impacts on how they research and present the needs of women. This project will be women led and women governed, therefore putting these women at the heart of the research.



What This Study Covers

Complementary and alternative medicines (CAM) are treatments that fall outside of mainstream healthcare.¹ These include, but are not limited to, Acupuncture, Ayurveda, Acupressure, Chiropractic care, Aromatherapy, Hypnosis, Massage Therapy and the use of Herbs and Spices. CAM have been in use for centuries and have been growing in popularity in recent years. Over 80% of the world population depends on herbal medicines and this is more prevalent in third world countries where access to more mainstream medication is not available or affordable.



This study aims to evaluate and understand what Muslim women's thoughts on CAM are. Women are the leading users of CAM, both as consumers and as service providers. ^{2,3} This could be for several reasons such as:

- Not being satisfied with conventional medicine and the results they give.
- CAM align better with their values and beliefs towards health and life.
- Alternative therapies have been passed down through generations and are seen as genuine alternatives to conventional medicine.
- Being a cheaper alternative to conventional medication.
- Negating the side effects some conventional medication can bring about.

As such, their views on the subject matter are of utmost importance when trying to evaluate this practice. This report will try to analyse these reasons, determine whether CAM treatment is effective and safe, and to provide recommendations on CAM and whether they should be used as an alternative or in conjunction with conventional medicine.

We will also try to understand why they have these ideas about CAM, whether these ideas are relevant or if they are misconceptions due to lack of knowledge or tradition. We will then try to make recommendations on how to improve on this.

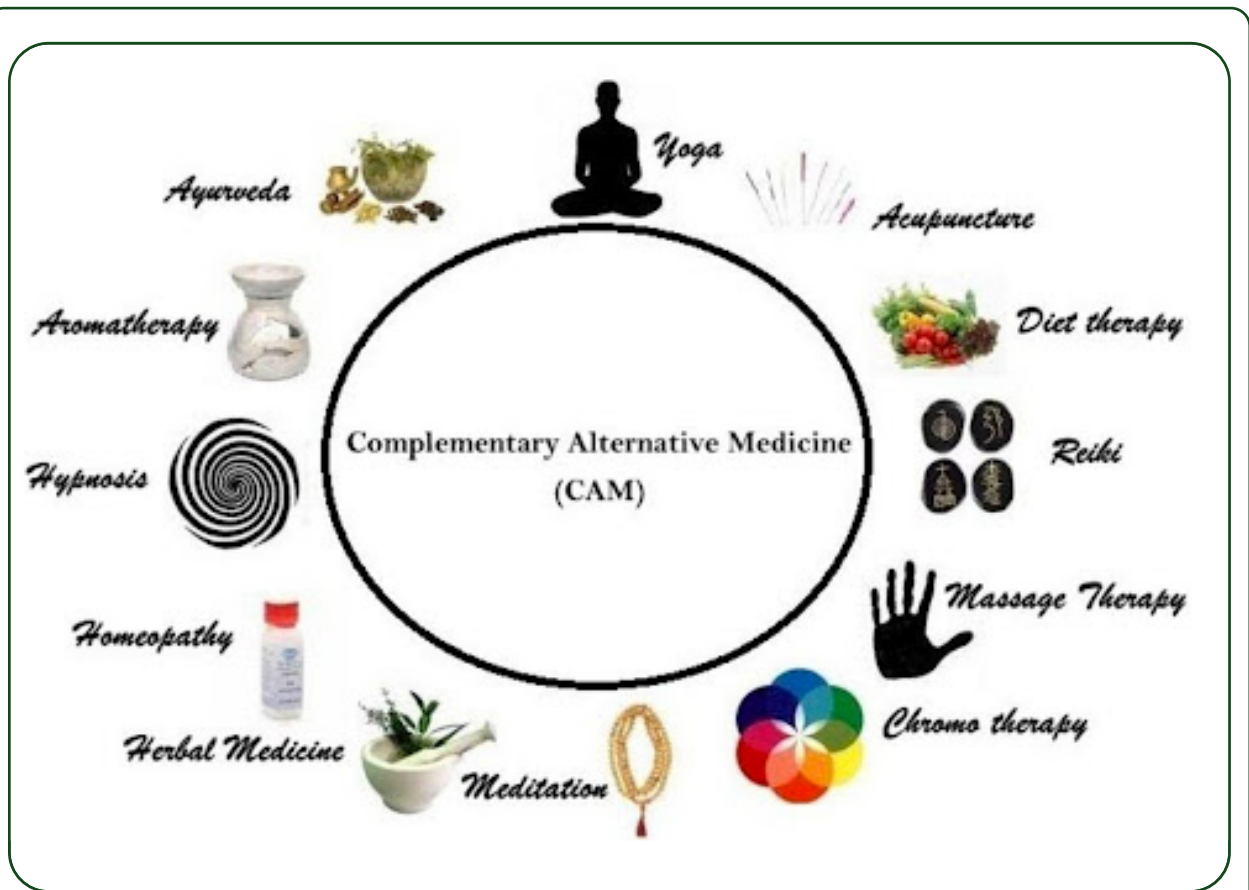
Part of the reason for the increase in acceptance of alternative medicine is the recognition of the powers of the mind over the body. There is increasing evidence that a patient's attitude can sometimes shape the physical response, and this in part helps to illustrate why alternative medicine is more well received than it used to be. A patient who believes they are doing better, often will.

Alternative medicine has been gaining in both popularity and acceptance in recent years. Many cities now have a plethora of shops where a person interested in buying alternative medicines can go to find whatever they are seeking, in addition to being able to take advantage of many alternative medicine services at local practitioners' offices.

The practice of conventional medicine is regulated by laws that ensure that practitioners are properly qualified and adhere to certain standards or codes of practice. This is called statutory professional regulation.

Professionals of two complementary and alternative treatments – osteopathy and chiropractic are regulated in the same way.

There is no statutory professional regulation of any other CAM practitioners which can leave CAM patients under-served, vulnerable to exploitation, and unable to realise meaningful recovery.



Key Findings

Research suggests that significant numbers of people are involved with various forms of alternative medicine. However, the reasons for such use are, at present, poorly understood.

Some of the reasons that Muslim women use CAM are:

- Dissatisfaction with Scientific Medicine (SM) – Women’s confidence in SM continues to be tested, as medicine is often inadequate in meeting the differential needs of female bodies and women patients. Most research has been conducted on male bodies. Women are still often perceived as “reproductive beings” which leads to non-reproductive health problems being under-researched and under-diagnosed.⁴ In general, women’s health issues are liable to be attributed to psychological or emotional, rather than physical, causes. This leads to women choosing CAM as they have lost their faith in scientific medicine.

- Social Influences – CAM, such as herbs (turmeric, garlic, ginger) have been seen as remedies for many illnesses for generations and have been passed down over time. They are engrained in the culture. Another example would be Cupping (Hijamah) as this was a remedy the prophet Muhammad (pbuh) regularly used and has now become a mainstream CAM in the Muslim community, also spreading into western culture. Many elite athletes now use cupping as a regular therapy to help speed recovery and remove toxins from the blood. Hijamah, the Arabic term for cupping, literally means to reduce size or to return the body to its natural and harmonious state.
- People see alternative medicine as a way of offering them more control over their healthcare decisions and the alternatives are seen as more compatible with patients' values. – 11 percent of the 252 drugs considered “basic and essential” by the World Health Organization were “exclusively of flowering plant origin.”⁵ Drugs like codeine, quinine, and morphine all contain plant-derived ingredients. However, these medicines can also come with many side effects. While these manufactured drugs have certainly become paramount in our lives, it can be comforting to know that the power of nature is on our side, and these herbal choices are available to complement our health practices. However, it is important to note that these alternatives aren't cure-alls, and they aren't perfect. Many carry the same risks and side effects as manufactured medicines, and are sold with unfounded promises.



- The Quran advises that there is a cure for every illness and Prophetic teachings encourage people to search for cures aswell. "Allah has sent down both the disease and the cure, and He has appointed a cure for every disease, so treat yourselves medically, but use nothing unlawful."⁶ This makes people believe that there are better alternatives out there than medicine prescribed by healthcare professionals, which are natural and more in tune to their religious beliefs.
- 'I know I can cure my illness with prayer and alternative medicines and practices' Alternative and complementary therapy can pose dangers – some concerns include delaying surgery, radiation, chemotherapy, or other traditional treatment by using an alternative therapy can allow illnesses to spread. Some complementary and alternative therapies have been reported to cause serious problems or even deaths. Certain vitamins and minerals can increase the risk of cancer or other illnesses, especially if too much is taken. Whilst other approaches are unlikely to cause harm and won't interfere with treatment.

Here are some examples:

- Acupuncture may help with mild pain and some types of nausea.
- Art or music therapy may promote healing and enhance quality of life.
- Massage therapy can decrease stress, anxiety, depression, and pain and increase alertness, according to some studies.
- Prayer and spirituality help many people with the emotional side effects of an illness.

As can be seen from the above, the use of CAM provides a feeling of independence and control over their healthcare decisions.

According to the religion of Islam, Muslims are strongly encouraged to seek treatment and care. Some Muslims use cultural and dietary supplements to help treat their illnesses or relieve their symptoms. Black Seed and special herbs are one example. Many Muslims believe Black Seed will cure many diseases as it is reference in prophetic tradition to have healing qualities. Another example of this is honey.

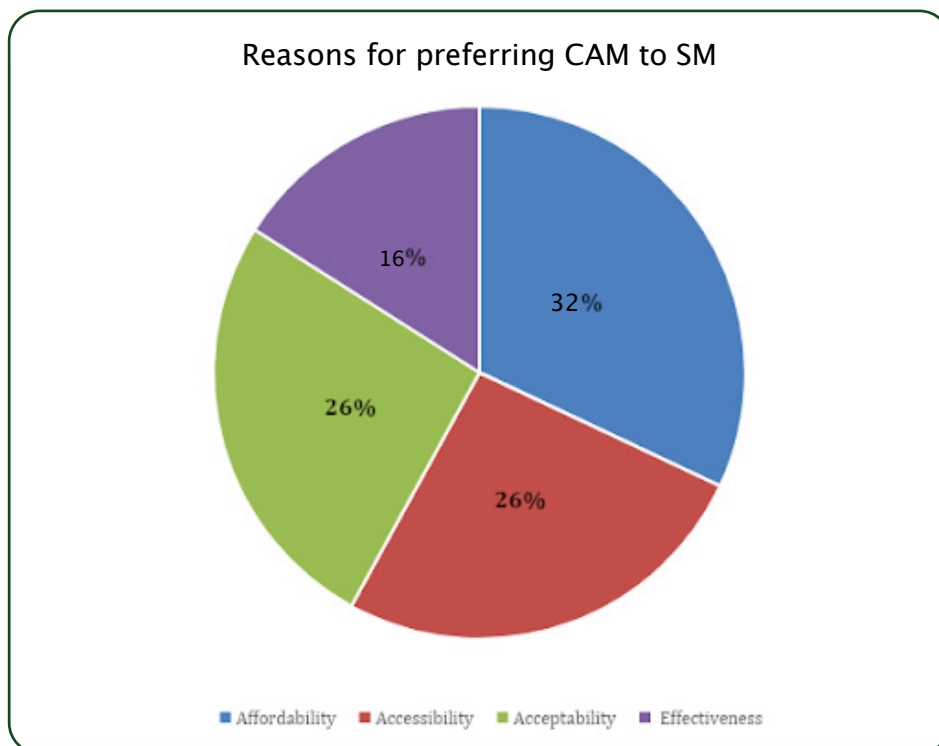
Also, many Muslims do not consume products that contain gelatine- derived from pork- for religious reasons, but some medications, such as flu vaccines, contain this substance. This is another reason why Muslim women turn to CAM instead of Scientific medicine. It is important for the health care experts to know this so that they can prescribe another treatment that does not have this ingredient, or at least discuss this with the patient. Due to the prohibited ingredients, many Muslim women will choose not to have the different treatments available even if it meant the prevention and relief of suffering. It is important to note however, that Muslims are excused from certain religious practices or obligations when there is no other alternative.

Doctors' views on CAM in the UK fall into three main groups. The "enthusiasts", the "sceptics" and the "undecided."

Doctors expressed that a more open doctor-patient communication about CAM may help with their concerns about CAM, or to at least expand their knowledge in this field. Most doctors expressed that they have no training in CAM and are therefore reluctant to offer advice on them.

Some GP's stated that the practice of CAM is enabling them to engage with both the art and the science of medicine and has enabled them to practice medicine in a more holistic way.

In the case of doctors who were more negative about CAM, one of the concerns was that the therapies could give patients false hope. They were also wary that if the patients are sold something that claims to heal them, but it actually has adverse effects, it could prove very detrimental. They were also suspicious of financial scams and unscrupulous therapists who preyed on vulnerable people.



Some of the views expressed by Muslim women surveyed



"I strongly believe natural remedies are so much more beneficial for us. We can't trust other medicine as it has so many side-effects. Our religion teaches us the benefits of natural remedies too."



"Most scientific medicine is just a money-making scam!"



"I am a big advocate of herbal remedies alongside normal medicine. I used both during my cancer treatment & I feel that is what helped me get through it."



"I am awaiting a knee transplant, but the waiting list is so long and my pain is getting worse, so in the meantime I am trying alternative therapies such as drainage massages and injections. These private treatments are expensive and I have no idea if they will help, so I'm not sure if it's the right thing to do."



"My friend refused chemotherapy after a few sessions and stuck to alternative treatments like juicing and vitamin injections. I personally feel that made her illness worse."



"I think you should be able to speak to your GP about alternative treatments, they should go hand in hand with scientific medicine. At the moment they seem to be two separate forms of treatment with no connection, which is not ideal."

Key Recommendations

Based on the above findings, we suggest the following recommendations that would provide meaningful and effective changes that would improve the knowledge and understanding of CAM in Muslim women.

- Government funded initiatives are needed to help tackle the lack of knowledge about CAM but also to be used as a means of getting more information out to Muslim women to increase their knowledge about CAM.
- GP's to be trained on CAM so they are able to give recommendations to patients regarding this.
- More studies on each type of CAM to determine the effectiveness in treating illnesses in comparison to scientific medicine, and whether they would help if used in conjunction with each other.
- Greater regulation in the alternative therapy market to stop unscrupulous practitioners from taking advantage of vulnerable people searching for cures to their ailments.
- Make screening mandatory for women over the age of 50 rather than something that is voluntary. Perhaps start screening even earlier than that, such as at 45 and above. This would also be a perfect opportunity to provide relevant information to women to improve their knowledge on cancer and stress the importance of screening and early diagnosis.
- Physicians need to have a better understanding of the Muslim women they treat and the alternative remedies they may be using. Perhaps it should be compulsory for doctors to ask what alternative remedies they are trying so they can analyse whether these remedies are okay to be used in conjunction with traditional therapy, or are detrimental to use.
- More studies need to be carried out using females as the subject rather than males as there are major differences between both sexes, and therefore will be differences in the treatment that is needed to be given.

- Muslims need to understand that whilst their ailments may be seen as a test from Allah, He has provided cures for all ailments and treatment should be sought after. These tests are a test of faith that you continue to turn to Allah for help, but this does not mean that you should not receive medical treatment. When the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was ill, he sought treatment from trained healers as well as making prayer to Allah. Not all ailments have cures which have been found yet, so using scientific medicine in these instances is acceptable.



Case Study 1

Nadia was diagnosed with Stage 3 Cervical Cancer in 2012 at the age of 51.

She was a single mother of 2 and was told to undergo multiple rounds of chemotherapy and radiotherapy to try and cure this.

Rather than wanting to go through the pain of this treatment, she was advised to try a herbal “juicing treatment” which was not medically approved.

Initially, her symptoms started to lessen, but unfortunately the Cancer claimed Nadia’s life.

Speaking to family members, their views were very negative about CAM. In hindsight, had they known the outcome, they would have sought out traditional GP medicine. But the research they had done in the beginning had led them to believe that alternative medicine was the best course of action, and better than chemotherapy and all the side effects associated with it.

They felt more knowledge needed to be out there regarding this and GP’s should be more aware of the alternative treatments being offered, so they can dissuade patients from taking that route.



Case Study 2

Fatima was diagnosed with breast cancer in late 2019 and was informed that the cancer had spread too far through her body to be cured. She is a single working professional with no children.

She was only given a few months to live. As a result, she was not offered chemotherapy or radiotherapy.

She conducted her own research and as a result, travelled abroad to receive a Juicing treatment for 3 months and is now receiving herbal tablets sent to her through the post.

She was told she did not have long left but 2 years later she is still here and her cancer is almost gone. She has now started chemotherapy and radiotherapy to remove the last of the cancer.

Fatima says she would swear by alternative medicine and would urge everyone to try it. However, she also said she would not discount traditional scientific medicine and would always try and use them together to increase her chances of recovery, no matter what the illness was.



Conclusion

Alternative medicine is many different things to many people. There is no one-line answer that can define the term. Advantages of therapies include less side effects, feeling more in control and in some cases less expensive than scientific medicine.

Disadvantages are that they are non-evidence based. Evidence on the effectiveness of these treatments is still largely unknown and this could have adverse effects on patients who only use CAM. These treatments could also interact negatively with conventional medicine if not checked properly. There is also a risk of practitioners abusing their patients' trust just to earn money.

In addition to this, it seems that CAM do not have the same effect on every person which suggests that there could be other reasons behind some people having positive results and others not.

It is clear that CAM are important but a lot more research is required to understand their effectiveness. The best approach for the time being is to use them in conjunction with conventional medicine but on the recommendation and approval of a doctor.

Report created by the Think + Do Tank participants supported by the MWC team.

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