

Building the Bridge Between Conventional Medicine and Holistic Healing

A Look at What's New at the Complementary and Alternative Medicine Research Center at the University of Michigan

By Lucinda R. Kurtz

"Research Your Passion in Complimentary and Alternative Medicine: A Skill-based Course for Community Practitioners," read the advertisement in the *Crazy Wisdom Calendar* this past summer. I was intrigued by the possibility of bringing the Hands of Light energy healing work I do into a greater acceptance by mainstream medicine. Would this course enable me to bridge the yawning gulf between alternative healing modalities and evidence-based medicine? Would it be possible to create a bridge between two seemingly contradictory world views? Conventional medicine, based largely on the assumption that the real world is composed primarily of physical matter, seems to be at odds with many forms of alternative healing which are based on the assumption that consciousness precedes existence and that healing can be approached through the



Photo by Ruth Schekter

Rita Benn is the Director of Education for the U-M Complementary and Alternative Medicine Research Center.

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energy system of the human body. What exactly is the CAM Research Center at the University that was offering this course? These and other questions lead me into a remarkable connection with a number of talented and committed researchers and practitioners devoted to bridging the gap between allopathic and complementary medicine.

It was the vision, determination, hard work, and "guts" of a few dedicated people that helped birth the Complementary and Alternative Medicine Research Center at the University of Michigan. A National Institute of Health funded research grant initially launched the Center in 1998 and helped it to develop an infrastructure to run three funded clinical trials and build broad university support for CAM. An interdisciplinary group of researchers that extends across departments of the Medical School and includes CAM community practitioners came together under the competent and visionary leadership of family physician Sara L. Warber, MD and cardiac surgeon, Steven F. Bolling, MD to quickly become a national and international model for integrative medicine.

The teachers for my course were Rita Benn and Suzie Zick. Rita Benn, PhD, is the Director of Education for the CAM Research Center, and Suzie Zick, ND, MPH, is a naturopathic physician whose research grant on the Effects of Hawthorn in Congestive Heart Failure formed part of the initial grant from NIH. The level of sophistication of their instruction, the quality of the materials they provided, the professionalism of their approach, and the seriousness of their commit-

ment to bring together conventional and complementary practices and practitioners was clearly evident. Also clear was their respect for the ten of us community practitioners in the class who offered a wide range of healing modalities including massage therapy, nutrition, chiropractic, homeopathy, energy healing, naturopathy, craniosacral therapy, and herbal medicine.

Rita Benn is currently leading the CAM Research Center in bold new directions. The CAM Center just last year received a \$1.5 million grant from NIH for an ambitious 5-year educational expansion. Its purpose is threefold: to create an integrative undergraduate Medical School CAM curriculum; to develop an interdisciplinary CAM Faculty Scholars Program; and to initiate a Graduate Certificate Program in Holistic Health.

quently, CAM course content is skillfully incorporated over the four-year curriculum starting with a seven and a half hour unit in the first year where students have an opportunity to go to different practitioners in the community, observe their practice, discuss their experiences, and try to understand how conventional medicine and CAM function either alone or in tandem with each other.

Pointing out the importance of this early experience, Rita Benn states, "Literature shows that patients don't share with their physicians what they are doing with respect to CAM because they are afraid of what their physician might tell them or they might not feel that they will get approval for that kind of path. It is important that students have experiences early on so they can be exposed to different modalities. Then they have a frame of reference for what their patients may be talking about later and can ask questions in a nonjudgmental way."

Another component of the NIH grant funded expansion is the development of an interdisciplinary CAM Faculty Scholars Program. This is one of the very first programs on campus and nationwide that is training faculty from different disciplines together in a new academic field. Seven faculty from Social Work, Business, Public Health, Medicine, Pharmacy, Psychiatry, and other disciplines are learning one day a month together about the theory and practice and research related to CAM. The Faculty Scholars Program will be offered four different times during the period of the grant and bring together 7-8 faculty at a time. Dr. Benn points out, "The goal for each one of them is to develop an educational component about CAM, designing either a new course or including materials that they can implement into their own courses already."



The Complementary and Alternative Medicine Research Center is located in 2 renovated houses on East Huron Street, across from the Frieze Building.

In fulfilling the first component of the expansion, creating an integrative undergraduate Medical School CAM curriculum, Dr. Benn comments, "The goal is to integrate material into the lectures and field visit experiences of students in CAM, not to add additional courses." Conse-

The CAM Center is creating a cadre of enthusiastic and committed scholars across all segments of the university community to root this new perspective into already established disciplines and course offerings. Center Director Sara Warber is "thrilled by this program which allows us to create permanent change within the institution

by building a strong group of creative and talented people knowledgeable about alternative practice and ways of thinking.”

This faculty training is the precursor to the final element of the expansion, the development of an interdisciplinary Graduate Certificate Program in Holistic Health and Healing that provides an opportunity for students in any discipline to learn more about CAM. This program is intended to complement graduate students’ courses of study within their field of specialization. In addition to basic courses within their own discipline, students will be required to take a set of common core courses that will provide them with a solid foundation for integrating CAM and conventional medicine and undertaking clinical practice or research from a holistic health perspective.

Anyone involved in university life can imagine the complexity of an undertaking that endeavors to integrate faculty and students from all segments of the campus, ground them in an emerging academic field, develop core course content, identify and assess graduate school

inclusion of three research grants in the original NIH grant which initiated the CAM Center gave the program credibility within a conservative academic institution that allowed it to make a successful transformation from a nascent

form connections with their fellow students in deeper ways that are so important for their support during medical school. It’s a way of teaching students to be empathic, to learn about themselves and become self-aware. It’s the beginning of a foundation for relationship-centered skills for physicians and health-care professionals.”

Viewing the CAM Center and its offerings from the inside, as a practitioner enrolled in a challenging course of study focused on learning the essential elements of researching and grant writing techniques, I am truly exhilarated at the new

perspective this undertaking has given me. I am impressed by the combination of scientific rigor and broad collaboration that is needed to bring any small new development into accepted practice through research. I understand the requirements of “evidence based” medicine and how a new practice must be validated in a particular manner to become accepted and integrated into practice.

This “insider’s” view also provided me with new language with which to discuss my energy healing practice with two first year medical students coming to learn about this CAM modality in late Fall to satisfy one part of the CAM component of their training. I mused to myself how different this interaction with these medical students was from interactions in former years. I could explain my work in new language, with a new sensibility of the mind-set of these students, based in the theory, evidence, and practice of conventional medicine. Somehow the distance between us didn’t seem like the yawning gap I originally perceived.

I am reminded of astronaut Edgar Mitchell’s comments when he returned from his historic moon landing, “When I went to the moon, I was as pragmatic a test pilot, engineer and scientist as any of my colleagues. But when I saw the planet Earth floating in the vastness of space . . . the presence of divinity became almost palpable and I knew that life in the universe was not just an accident based on random process. The knowledge came to me directly—noetically. It was knowledge gained through subjective awareness, but it was—and still is—every bit as real as the objective data upon which, say, the navigational program or the communications system were based.” This awareness led to his founding of the Institute of Noetic Science to study the potentials and nature of the human mind and to bridge the gap between mainstream science and the frontiers of consciousness research.

My hope is that the medical students who visited me and the other CAM community practitioners as part of their undergraduate medical school curriculum can get a small taste of the “knowledge gained through subjective

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educational program. We were able to capitalize on the groundwork we had laid. We knew what we needed and could be visionary.”

Both Rita Benn and Sara Warber point to the opening of the Integrative Medicine Wellness Center at the Briarwood Family Practice Center in the near future as the next step in bringing alternative healing modalities to the community.



Photo by Linda Lawson

Dr. Sara Warber is the Co-Director of the Complementary and Alternative Medicine Research Center.

requirements, cross-list courses, and initiate a new interdisciplinary program. This integration requires meticulous planning, keen organizational understanding, political savvy, intuition, and interpersonal sensitivity. Rita Benn, Sara Warber, and their cohorts at the CAM Center embody and wisely use these skills in implementing their far-reaching vision.

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15 universities that have received this NIH grant to integrate CAM into the curriculum, every one of the universities is approaching this task from a different perspective. And few are attempting such a wide-ranging integration.

There is only one other university in the 15 that have received the grant where the research and education components are combined. Dr. Warber points out, “The

Dr. Warber will be one of the two family physicians working at the Clinic one half day each week. She sees this as a big step toward creating an atmosphere of respect for what is useful to each individual patient that might be beyond the normal practice of his/her own physician. Evidence can be gathered to provide documentation on alternative modalities that consistently assist the patient in his/her healing process

Several other smaller programs and courses also reflect the sensibility and community orientation of the professionals involved with the CAM Center. Rita Benn seems particularly proud of the Mind-Body Skills Course offered in the past couple of years to about 50 medical school students and 15 students in other allied health fields. Adapted from the Center for Mind-Body Medicine in Washington, DC, this 1 credit course introduces students (or clients in a clinical setting) to a different variety of mind-body techniques each week, such as meditation, guided imagery, drawing, movement, and writing. Students have an opportunity to learn, practice and discuss these techniques that can enhance health and well-being and moderate stress.

Dr. Benn comments, “We’ve looked at their well-being before and after the course on a standardized measure and found that they significantly increased their sense of well-being. They said they really learned how to listen and to

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awareness” that guides our work. This could provide an experiential basis for a larger understanding of reality that encompasses more than just the physical and posits that everything is fundamentally interconnected. The CAM Research Center, in its multi-faceted educational expansion, is leading the way toward this larger integration of underlying assumptions and is doing this with integrity, sophistication, and great success.

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