

## LETTER TO THE EDITOR

### Alternate Approaches to Infertility - Are They Safe?

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The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that approximately 8%-10% of couples experience some form of infertility problem. On a worldwide scale, this means that 50-80 million people suffer from infertility. However, the incidence of infertility may vary from region to region (1). The incidence of infertility in men and women is almost identical. Infertility is exclusively a female problem in 30%-40% of cases and exclusively a male problem in 10%-30% of cases. Problems common to both partners are diagnosed in 15%-30% of infertile couples. After thorough medical investigations, the causes of the fertility problem remain unexplained in only a minority of infertile couples (5%-10%) (2). Recent research has brought good news for infertile couples inasmuch as there are new treatment strategies, such as in-vitro fertilization (IVF) and microinsemination. The bad news, however, is that this progress is restricted mainly to the treatment of symptoms. There has been little gain in the prevention and clarification of the underlying causes. All ancient, alternate therapies, be they in native North America, India, China, Japan, or ancient Greece, believed that there were 2 fundamental aspects to the human body, one being the actual physical shell (clinically called the corporeal body) that makes cells, blood, tissue and so on, and the other where there was an energy flow that made the physical body come alive. This was known as the life force or life energy. In fact, it was so central to the view of human function that each non-Western culture has a word for "life force." In China, it is called qi (pronounced chee); in India it is called prana; in Japan it is called ki; and the ancient Greeks called it pneuma, which has become a prefix in medicine to do with breath and lungs.

Today, Western medicine concentrates on the corporeal body and does not recognize that we have a life force. However, in ancient healing, it is thought that the life force heals the corporeal body, not the other way around. There are quite a lot alternate approaches like Ayurvedic medicine, Chinese medicine, acupuncture, shiatsu (a type of massage), herbal therapy, holistic medicine, homeopathy, naturopathy and reflexology for the treatment of infertility. This article emphasizes the efficacy and safety regarding these therapies. There are some risks with alternative medicine. Firstly there is no scientific proof to support most of the treatments, or claims of the therapies. Secondly there are no particular guidelines that govern non-Western practitioners, the alternative "industry" attracts quacks and charlatans, and the costs of some therapies are often prohibitive. Certain preparations used in these therapies are boiled down in clay or metal pots, leaving residues of lead, mercury, arsenic, gold, or cadmium, which may be toxic to the body, and also it is difficult to get these herbal preparations in purified and standardized form. It is important to keep in mind that when it comes to researching alternative therapies, most Western researchers do not know enough about them to design proper studies. It is easy to say "prevention is better than cure", but the difficulty with infertility is that the available knowledge on pathogenesis is very poor. Therefore, we conclude that further studies like double-blind controlled studies should be conducted to determine the efficacy and safety of these alternative therapies in the management of infertility.

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