



Alternative Medicine: Not as Weird as You Might Think

I hesitated for weeks to make the appointment. I kept looking at the business card that a friend had given me for Dr. Alan Kuo whom she suggested might be able to help with the ache in my wrists from too much typing. The business card itself was mysterious: "China Herbs, China Tuina Center" it said. "Finger accupressure, herbs, tea & health foods."

Now, I'm not much of a risk taker, and despite living in Ann Arbor, I don't go for new-agey fads much. I've known people who endorsed alternative medicine, and I've mostly thought they were kinda odd folks. But the pain finally drove me to call this Dr. Kuo. Since it was a doctor's office, I expected a secretary to tell me there was an opening for a new patient in a few months. So I was surprised when a man with an Asian accent answered the phone with just a "Hello." It was Dr. Kuo himself. I told him I wanted to make an appointment, and he asked, "You want to come today?"

It was the first of many surprises that would challenge my skepticism and highlight for me the shortcomings of my usual experience with Western medicine. As alternative medicine is becoming more mainstream, many people are discovering that it's not the strange, mystical, or even quack practices they once thought. And, like me, they're realizing how much their previous visits to doctors have lacked important elements of care and health promotion.

Dr. Kuo began studying medicine at the age of seven in Taiwan. He is the tenth generation of physicians in his family. His uncle was his first teacher, showing him how to understand the human body through touch and how to mix herbs for various remedies. He is now in his early 50s with practices in Ann Arbor (677-3262) and Sterling Heights. He has diabetes and admits to having smoked a lot of cigarettes before he quit years ago. He's divorced and remarried and misses his sons in Taiwan (who are also doctors).



Dr. Kuo told me all of this, not in an interview for this piece, but during my visits as a patient. I've never had any doctors who told me about their personal lives, and certainly not about their own health problems or bad habits. But Dr. Kuo shares this information freely, perhaps to ensure me of his competence while making me feel comfortable. He doesn't try to use a professional distance to inspire confidence.

He also told me these things to fill the time while he massaged my arms, shoulders, back,

and feet. In the HMO-dominated medical industry today, having a doctor spend more than ten minutes with a patient is almost unthinkable. After three 45-minute appointments, I'd probably spent more time with Dr. Kuo than with all other doctors I'd ever seen, combined. And after that time, he also knew more about me than any other doctor had ever sought to know. I came to see him about my wrists, but he cared about my total well-being. (Imagine that, a doctor focused on health rather than sickness.) He talked to me about the value of drinking tea or water all day long, scolded me for going outside with wet hair, and praised the health benefits of establishing and keeping daily routines. He spoke to me kindly about my need to lose some weight, and, for the first time, I felt motivated to respond. Weeks later, when his scale showed I'd lost a few pounds, he did a little dance in his office, saying, "I succeed! I succeed!"

He has succeeded with my wrist pain as well. Using the massage (called accupressure)

on different pressure points in my body, he has dramatically reduced the constant ache. I admit he's also tried some remedies that were both strange and fascinating. A few times he has applied stinky banana-based pastes to my skin or burned little herbal tablets along my arm until smoke filled the room. He also uses "cupping" (warm glass suction cups on the back) to increase oxygen in the blood and draw out the bad stuff. I have no idea of the value of these practices, but I figure they can't hurt. Most doctors I might have seen about my wrist would have prescribed pharmaceuticals or recommended surgery, two practices which are also mysterious to the layperson yet are more intrusive and could be harmful.

I have spoken to other patients of Dr. Kuo who have also experienced great relief, including a young man with a serious back injury and an older woman with recurring bronchitis. And I see all kinds of people entering and leaving his office, from garage mechanics to athletes to elderly Chinese ladies.

I'm glad that I and others have overcome our resistance and discovered that medicine can make us feel better with simple, non-invasive, non-chemical techniques. If you've

long been an advocate of this or other kinds of alternative approaches, then perhaps you're smirking at my own conversion, but if you're a skeptic like I was, I urge you to consider someone like Dr. Kuo next time you're suffering. Such a doctor probably won't be a substitute for your regular physician (Dr. Kuo also sees a Western doctor), but as an additional caregiver with concern for your whole health, you may be as surprised as I was to see the difference it can make.

Unfortunately, HMOs and other so-called health insurance plans typically don't cover the costs of this kind of care, so even though Dr. Kuo's charges are reasonable (\$35-\$50 per visit), they may be prohibitive for some. But if they were covered, there would be the risk that making Dr. Kuo part of our health care system could reduce his flexibility in treating patients with patience and in taking a holistic approach rather than just focusing on reported symptoms. That would be a shame. In the coming years, I think we will see alternative medicine becoming less and less "alternative," and it will be interesting to see the results. But for now, I better stop typing, or I'm gonna have to make another appointment.