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Alternative medicines and treatments such as aromatherapy and homeopathy will start to be regulated this year by the government for the first time. Not only have alternative treatments always been regarded with some suspicion before for how well they work, but their very dubious nature has allowed many practitioners to take advantage of the fact that there are no rules and they have been able to market whatever they like to gullible clients. Thus a new organisation called the *Natural Healthcare Council*, backed by the Prince of Wales, will make sure that certain minimum standards are met in both the medicines offered and the abilities and professionalism of the practitioners.

Even though some alternative remedies are regarded as bogus by many, millions of people in the UK regularly use them. Indeed, it is estimated that *£130 million* a year is spent on complementary medicines with the figure sharply increasing by the year. The scheme will cover all complementary treatments such as “*aromatherapy, reflexology, massage, nutrition, shiatzu, reiki, naturopathy, yoga, homoeopathy, cranial osteopathy and the Alexander and Bowen techniques*”. Surprisingly studies have also shown that over two thirds of people in Britain believe that such remedies are valuable, many even claiming that they are the same or even better than conventional treatments.

It is therefore worrying that currently, unlike conventional medical practitioners, *anyone* can actually set themselves up as a reiki or reflexology professional and they would not be breaking any laws, leading much of the public into thinking that they are actually qualified. Now, the public will hopefully be able to ascertain the quality of different practices by checking if they conform to the government standard. Though joining the scheme is voluntary, businesses will lose out if they fail to give customers any evidence of their professionalism.

As Ian Cambray-Smith, of the scheme, says:

“Although it is a voluntary scheme, we believe that in dealing with misconduct by therapists it will be almost as robust as statutory regulation, and as tough as we can make it. Suspension from the register will be the ultimate sanction. It will be good for practitioners, good for patients, and even good for the NHS. If there is a complaint, the council will convene a board of lay people, plus two practitioners, to review the case. If it is proven, a second board will determine what disciplinary procedures to take.”

Personally I am very sceptical about *any* alternative treatments, as they are probably harmful at worst and placebos at best. Whatever your views on them though, it is clear that there will be a lot of hoaxes amongst the genuine treatments. Therefore any proper regulation on the part of the government can only be a good thing.

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