

10.3 Beyond mainstream medicine

Researchers predicted in 2002 that by 2070, people would live to the average age of 100 (it stood at 80 for women and 75 for men at the time the prediction was made). They put this down to the advances made in medicine in the twentieth century. So what happens if people develop immunity to prescribed drugs? How do things like 'positive health' and 'alternative medicines' fit into all this?

Objectives

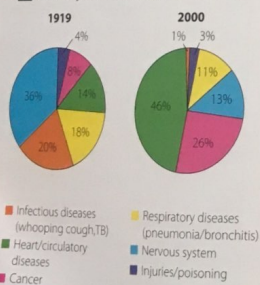
- ▶ Define antibiotic resistance.
- ▶ Describe alternative treatments.
- ▶ Explore advances in healthcare in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Antibiotic resistance

The battle against disease, and other causes of death, continues in the same way as it always has. The range of new drugs being produced every year is huge. Drug companies spend billions of pounds on research, knowing that enormous profits can be made. Since the development of penicillin, there have been many more discoveries of different types of antibiotics that kill all sorts of bacteria, including tuberculosis; and lots of different vaccines that prevent and control diseases such as polio, measles, mumps and whooping cough.

However, despite the development of new drugs, not all drugs work: even proven antibiotics can fail. In fact, the effectiveness of antibiotics can lead to their overuse, prompting bacteria to evolve and become increasingly resistant to common antibiotics. An example of an antibiotics-resistant bacteria is called MRSA (methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*), first reported in a British study in 1961.

▼ Causes of death in the UK, 1919 and 2000



although treatable depending on the type – is still a major killer disease. As a result some people turn to alternative therapies to find ways of improving their health and treating their illnesses.

Alternative medicine is the term used to describe any other way of treating an illness or health condition that doesn't rely on mainstream, doctor-dispensed scientific medicine, or on proven evidence gathered using the scientific method. It includes a wide range of practices and therapies.

▼ B An extract from a survey on the popularity of alternative therapies, in which 2000 British people took part

Alternative therapy	Tried by [%]	Satisfied [%]	Not satisfied [%]
Herbal medicine	12	73	18
Homeopathy	4	66	16
Acupuncture	3	50	47
Chiropractic	2	68	19
Hypnotherapy	2	43	50

Those in favour of alternative medicine argue that these treatments consider the patient as a whole, instead of beating a disease down by finding the cause and then hitting it with drugs. However, some have put the increase in popularity of alternative healthcare down to a lack of confidence in conventional doctors and hospital care. In Britain in the 2000s, a number of scandals (such as that concerning Dr Harold Shipman, who murdered his patients and stole their money) reduced public confidence. However, generally speaking, satisfaction levels with the treatment people get from their hospitals and GPs remains quite high. A 2014 survey of nearly 2000 people found that 71 per cent were satisfied with the service they received from their doctor.

Since the 1980s, alternative medicine has become more and more popular in Britain, and some of it (such as acupuncture) is now available on the NHS.

Aromatherapy

What is it? Aromatherapy is the use of essential oils from flowers, fruits, roots and leaves. The oils are inhaled or massaged into the skin.

Effect? The inhaled scents are said to stimulate particular parts of the brain, which promote healing, while massaged oils pass into the bloodstream and can influence nervous system function, mental function and emotions.

Hypnotherapy

What is it? A therapist hypnotises the patient. When totally relaxed, the patient can be relieved of stress, allergies or even physical addictions such as smoking.

Effect? It is based on positive thinking – that the power of a patient's own mind can bring about their healing.

Examples of alternative or complementary medicine

Homeopathy

What is it? Patients take a medicine (a plant, animal or mineral material soaked in alcohol) which causes similar symptoms to the illness they are suffering from.

Effect? The idea is that tiny doses of the medicine that causes similar symptoms will cure the patient by stimulating his or her natural defences. Studies have shown homeopathy to be effective in treating hay fever, insomnia, depression and eczema.

In fact, a recent survey indicated that one in five people in Britain have consulted alternative healers and used alternative medicines. Today one in ten doctors is actively involved in the promotion of alternative medicine, and they sometimes offer 'complementary' medicine, which is when an alternative practice is used together with conventional medicine.

In recent years, there has been a greater emphasis placed on prevention rather than cure – this is sometimes known as 'positive health'. People are learning that regular exercise is very important for health; and that a good diet which avoids sugary, fatty foods can help prevent some of the twenty-first century's biggest killers, such as obesity and heart disease. There is also a lot of emphasis on making 'lifestyle changes' and publicising the dangers of tobacco and the misuse of alcohol and drugs.

There has also been an increase in screening, which focuses on checking people who seem to be healthy, aiming to find those who have the early signs of a serious illness like lung or breast cancer.

Key Words

positive health alternative medicine

Acupuncture

What is it? Fine needles are placed at key points around the body. The places chosen are thought to be linked with particular needs or illnesses. Acupuncture has been a key part of traditional Chinese medicine for thousands of years.

Effect? The needles are said to release blocked energy and balance it properly. Acupuncture allows the energy to flow again; and it stimulates healing and relieves pain. It has been used as an anaesthetic during major surgery.

▼ SOURCE C Acupuncture charts in an alternative therapy clinic



Work

- 1 Why do you think doctors and scientists are particularly worried about bacteria such as MRSA?
- 2 a What is meant by the term 'alternative medicine'?
- b Why has there been a rise in the popularity of alternative medicine in recent years?

Fact

One of the criticisms of alternative medicine is the lack of regulation. While mainstream medicine can only be practised by a doctor who has studied in medical school and been certified, alternative medicine can be prescribed by almost anyone. However, this is slowly changing as some alternative treatments such as osteopathy and chiropractic have professional regulations and licensing in the UK.