

The Spiritual Side of Medicine

"Science, Faith, and Alternative Medicine" by Ronald W. Dworkin, in *Policy Review* (Aug. & Sept. 2001), 1030 15th St., N.W., 11th fl., Washington, D.C. 20005.

Skeptics can't understand the allure of alternative medicine. Why would patients flock to therapies unproven by science? Yet Americans spent more than \$21 billion on alternative medicine in 1997, and last year spent more money for alternative therapies than they spent out-of-pocket in the entire mainstream medical system. Dworkin, a physician and a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute, perceives a logical basis for the migration: "Patients are fleeing the medical profession because doctors concentrate on rational knowledge at the expense of life's mysteries," he writes. "Organized religion concentrates exclusively on the unknown, and therefore seems to know nothing. In alternative medicine, people have discovered a compromise."

In the past, when people suffered "the two great misfortunes in life . . . illness and gloom," doctors, and also clergymen, offered sympathy, counsel, and consolation. Today, urged on by insurance companies, physicians put their patients into diagnostic categories and rush them through, rather than hear out each individual's complaints. Few doctors have the time or patience for such niceties today.

Alternative therapies—including acupuncture, herb therapy, biofeedback, magnet therapy, and chiropractic—attract patients disaffected by conventional medicine as well as those dissatisfied by religion's solutions. In Dworkin's view, practitioners of alternative therapy appeal to patients because they synthesize the most attractive aspects of medical science and religion. "Because alternative medicine is not confined by the limits of rational or testable knowledge, its powers of explanation are enormous, and patients leave . . . thinking that their troubles have real spiritual significance."

Many of these alternative therapies may depend upon the placebo effect, a phenomenon long recognized among medical professionals. Physicians in the past sometimes dis-

pensed placebos, such as sugar pills, for "three purposes: 1) to make a patient feel better when there [was] no illness, 2) to make a patient feel better (e.g., [feel] less pain) in spite of ongoing illness, and 3) to make a patient feel better by instilling hope when medical science deem[ed] a patient beyond hope." Doctors today are uncomfortable with this kind of deception, despite the fact, says Dworkin, that "*conventional* medical therapy has little effect on outcome in the vast majority of cases seen by doctors; patients will either recover on their own or stay with their disease."

Facing diagnoses of chronic or terminal conditions, or experiencing ineffective treatments from doctors, patients seek out alternative therapies, often combining these with the medical treatment they receive from their orig-



Alternative treatments such as crystal therapy usually include an important additional medicine: a sympathetic ear.

inal doctors. Instead of receiving cold, hard truths—or the indifference of assembly-line medicine—patients are told by their alternative practitioners that their condition is unique to them, and that the power to heal may exist inside their own bodies. The "boundless possibilities that suddenly appear on the horizon raise the spirits of these patients in the present. This is not a bad thing."

The danger, Dworkin cautions, lies in how little oversight the alternative field receives. He favors regulation of herbal medications by the Food and Drug Administration to ensure their purity. Otherwise, he leans toward a hands-off policy: Therapies that border on the religious,

such as transcendental meditation, should be neither supported nor regulated by government. Whatever policies emerge, says Dworkin,

should be crafted “with a degree of sympathy toward those who have found something of value in alternative medicine.”

ARTS & LETTERS

The Prophet of Scientific Morality

“Editor’s Column” by Walter A. McDougall, in *Orbis* (Summer 2001), Foreign Policy Research Inst., 1528 Walnut St., Ste. 610, Philadelphia, Pa. 19102-3684.

Mention Jules Verne (1828–1905), and most people think of the visionary novelist who, among other things, foretold the space age, inspiring such rocket scientists as Robert Goddard and Wernher von Braun, and penned books, such as *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1873) and *20,000 Leagues under the Sea* (1870), that spawned Hollywood hits. But the man himself, says McDougall, a historian at the University of Pennsylvania and the editor of *Orbis*, was a jumble of contradictions. Where one would expect to find “a rationalist and promoter of science,” one discovers a romantic. Instead of a bohemian like his contemporaries Victor Hugo and Émile Zola, “one finds a paragon of respectability.” And though Verne inhabits the public consciousness as “an apostle of progress,” McDougall reminds us that he “ended his life issuing jeremiads about the dangers of another Dark Age.”

Born in Nantes, the son of a lawyer who expected Jules to follow him into the legal profession, Verne at an early age acted upon the passions that were to rule his life: “freedom, music, and the sea.” At the age of 11, he stowed away on a ship bound for the West Indies; discovered and sent home, he promised his mother that “from now on, I will travel only in my dreams.” Verne obtained his law license in 1848 in Paris, but that same year Parisian mobs

overthrew the monarchy, and Verne embraced the liberal revolution. He walked away from law, and announced his intention in 1852 to become a writer. It took him a while to realize his ambition. He first married and became a stockbroker, but devoured books on science as he struggled to make his way.

Then, in 1862, a revelation: “It struck me one day that perhaps I might utilize my scientific education to blend together science and romance into a work . . . that might appeal to the public taste.” The result was *Five Weeks in a Balloon*, which launched his writing career. Soon to come were *Journey to the Center of the Earth* (1864) and the visionary *From the Earth to the Moon* (1865). Verne would publish 64 novels

and 21 short stories, becoming the fourth-most-translated author in history (behind Joseph Stalin, V. I. Lenin, and the detective writer Georges Simenon).

To McDougall, the message of such novels as *20,000 Leagues under the Sea* and *The Mysterious Island* (1875) is “a virtual catechism. Science permits human beings to locate themselves in the cosmos, survive perils, unlock Nature’s secrets, serve their fellow man, and finally become ‘more than a man.’” Verne’s scientist-heroes, such as Captain Nemo, are “godlike” creatures. It all seems to suggest a “positivistic stance: science as a sec-



An illustration from one of Jules Verne's best known works, 20,000 Leagues under the Sea