Alternative eye care

As ophthalmologists we tend to stick to what we know. We mostly use only four main groups of drugs that act on the eye—anti-infectives, anti-inflammatories, antiglaucoma medications, and lubricants—a limited formulary, but one that is evidence based according to our medical training. But there are alternative therapies which are becoming a growing part of our health care and for which eye conditions present an ideal substrate. In the United States alone an estimated $14 billion a year is spent on alternative treatments and 37 medical schools are starting to devote a small part of their training to this subject. 

In his Foundations of Ophthalmology (Vol VII, 1962) Duke-Elder covers a great deal more than pharmacology in his “Ocular therapeutics” section. He describes some unconventional biological and physical treatments which may have had their day but which do not seem so incongruous when compared with the vast array of alternative treatments revealed by searching the world wide web today.

In their time many of these treatments represented attempts to treat the untreatable. They demonstrated an inventive ingenuity influenced by the scientific knowledge of the day and were applied with great enthusiasm to unsuspecting patients. Some techniques that have been used include protein shock (milk, serum, or vaccine), biogenic stimulation with tissue such as placenta, injected subconjunctivally for a host of incurable eye conditions, and the injection of cobra venom for macular degeneration. Physical treatments that have been dreamt up over the years include environmental therapy (for the afflicted sick), ocular massage, blood letting, thermotherapy, and electrotherapy—a faradic current was used to create an “electric eye bath” which by all accounts created a “local gymnastic effect” on the sufferer. Three to four thousand years before the Christian era the cause of disease was blamed on malignant spirits and devils, and superstition and mystical rites dominated the therapeutic scene. The recital of complex incantations was enhanced and suggests as a treatment for cataract a 5 day fast with frequent blinking and taking a break during the advertisement is advised. Harry Benjamin goes one step further and suggests as a treatment for cataract a 5 day fast followed by a strict diet (with no bread or bananas), a nightly enema, and a daily dry friction rub.

As ophthalmologists we tend to stick to what we know. We mostly use only four main groups of drugs that act on the eye—anti-infectives, anti-inflammatory agents, and lubricants—a limited formulary, but one that is evidence based according to our medical training. But there are alternative therapies which are becoming a growing part of our health care and for which eye conditions present an ideal substrate. In the United States alone an estimated $14 billion a year is spent on alternative treatments and 37 medical schools are starting to devote a small part of their training to this subject. 

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Homeopathy offers remedies for eye injuries or eye strain based on microdoses of substances such as natrum muriaticum (for heavy eyelids and headaches) or ruta graveolens (for eye strain from overuse). For conjunctivitis with a thick yellow discharge, pulsatilla is recommended and for people who also have swollen glands, offensive breath, and excessive salivation—mercurius solubilis. Mercury of course has other connotations—namely, in the form of its yellow oxide which was first advocated as a panacea for chronic conditions of the outer eye by Alexander Pagenstecher of Wiesbaden in the middle of 19th century and which generally did more harm than good. An

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alternative treatment for conjunctivitis comes in the form of a herbal remedy comprising one teaspoon of goldenseal and half a teaspoon of myrrh mixed with water. A peeled and grated fresh potato applied to the eyelids acts as an astringent and is said to have a healing effect.

The Orient provides a rich source of life enhancing tonic herbs such as ginseng to which is attributed the ability to provide atmospheric energy to the five viscera, a quieting of the animal spirits, a brightening of the eye and improvement of vision. It is a western myth that ginseng should only be used by men and that it causes a moustache to grow on women. A wild ginseng root may be up to 200 years old and is pharmacologically diverse, containing over 20 constituents including vitamins B-1 and B-2, calcium, titanium, strontium, and several steroids. It is generally accepted that wild Manchurian Tung Pei ginseng is the finest available. Another ancient remedy still used today is an extract from a tree, Ginkgo biloba (the maidenhair tree), thought to be the oldest on earth (first growing about 190 million years ago). Ginkgo inhibits blood clotting and is used as an aid to mental alertness and is claimed to have improved visual acuity in macular degeneration. However, a combination with aspirin may be hazardous and has been associated with pupillary margin haemorrhage.

It is a fact of life that common degenerative conditions such as age related macular degeneration (ARMD) will attract novel methods of treatment, which are claimed as “revolutionary” and are potentially lucrative when one considers that 13 million American people over 65 are affected. One such is “Microcurrent stimulation: miracle eye cure” described by Edward C Kondrot. This technique, which is believed to improve membrane permeability, nerve conduction velocity, and ATP levels, has been evaluated by the American Academy of Ophthalmology’s Complementary Therapy Assessment Task Force. They concluded that there is no strong scientific evidence to demonstrate its effectiveness in treating ARMD. Moreover, “there may be a significant financial risk associated with the cost of treatment over a period of time.” Other forms of alternative treatment for ARMD include dietary supplements (lutein from spinach, carotenoids, and antioxidant vitamins) and fish consumed more than once a week.

The AAO task force has also focused on marijuana (Cannabis sativa, containing over 400 chemicals) for the treatment of glaucoma and found no scientific evidence to support its efficacy, although initial studies in the 1970s reported that smoked marijuana resulted in lower IOP 3–4 hours after administration. Topical administration, however, had no pressure lowering effect. Smoking marijuana is known to increase the heart rate and lower blood pressure which in turn may compromise optic nerve perfusion. Numerous adverse effects may occur but euphoria as an acute effect is acknowledged to be a benefit! Acupuncture has been part of the healthcare system in China for over 4500 years and is designed to correct the imbalance of energy flow (Qi) along specific channels throughout the body. Responses to skin stimulation include the release of opioid peptides accounting for an analgesic effect, an alteration in the secretion of neurotransmitters, and the regulation of blood flow.

Acupuncture has been reported for treating and alleviating a variety of ocular conditions including dry eye, myopia, paralytic strabismus, retinitis pigmentosa, optic atrophy, iritis, conjunctivitis, and cataract. As an example, a patient with an internal ocular haemorrhage may be diagnosed as suffering from an underlying systemic imbalance caused by an exuberance of liver yang or fire, for which needle techniques are applied to specific points around the eye. One such point is G-20 Fengchi, which intersects the meridians of the gall bladder, triple burner, and the Yang-linking, all of which embark or terminate in the eye vicinity. A successful manipulation technique creates a needle sensation that travels in the skull until it reaches the eye. This technique may be augmented by a heated snail shell placed over the closed eyelids (moxibustion), a procedure which if correctly performed should be enjoyable and relaxing for the patient.

The AAO task force has acknowledged that acupuncture may be useful as an adjunctive therapy or as an acceptable alternative to conventional treatment. After thousands of years the human race has remained profoundly superstitious and prepared to try virtually any remedy when faced with a threat such as blindness. There is infinite scope for quacks and entrepreneurs and many harebrained schemes have fallen by the wayside but, nevertheless, a vast knowledge base has accumulated. Whether treatment is based on hard evidence, common sense, old wives’ tales, or oriental wisdom, we should view it all with an open mind.

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3 Hayward R. Alternative medicine and the ‘therapy paradox’ (personal communication).