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CAM EDUCATION & RESEARCH

Using theory to guide undergraduate education of CAM

- Presented by Amy L. Versnik Nowak, PhD, at the American Public Health Association Annual Meeting, November 2007.

ABSTRACT

Effective complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) education in American colleges is needed. Research shows college students use many forms of CAM, from body-based methods to prayer for health. CAM studies among this population also suggest that college students use CAM at rates higher than the general population. This is consistent with findings that show education level to be a significant predictor of CAM use. Application of tested theoretical constructs can help health educators provide undergraduate students with learning experiences that prepare them for making safe and healthy choices in relation to CAM. In this session, discuss the implications of various approaches to CAM education, learn what theory-based research has revealed about predictors of CAM use, and come away with new insights for developing and enhancing undergraduate CAM education in America.

Key Conclusions

Education can influence the following constructs in these ways:

- Influence attitudes.
CAM information presented with positive or negative emphasis by an instructor can influence whether a student perceives CAM as positive or negative. Bias in textbooks can have the same effect.
- Promote or hinder awareness of CAM use.
By incorporating CAM as a topic, students can learn whether their peers, family members, etc. use CAM. Not discussing CAM may give the impression that it is not widely used or that it is not okay to use.
- Clarify expectations & values related to health care encounters.
Failing to discuss CAM therapies as health care alternatives can hinder a student's options and limit his/her awareness of how many people use CAM.

In turn, these constructs influence behavior. The behavior, in this case, is the decision to use CAM.

Key Recommendations

- Include CAM as a component in all personal health, consumer health, and health care-related courses.
- Choose textbooks carefully.
- Challenge instructor assumptions and bias related to health care.
- Assist students in clarifying and exploring pros and cons of all health care choices.