

# Considering the Alternative

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Marcia Angell, M.D., ('60), editor in chief of *The New England Journal of Medicine*, addressed the growing popularity of alternative medicines before a crowd of 200 on campus in November. As an experienced author, medical spokesperson, Fulbright Scholar and one of *Time* magazine's 25 Most Influential People of 1997, Angell's opinions carry considerable clout.

According to Angell, the term alternative medicine refers to a remarkable variety of theories and practices, including homeopathy, chiropractic medicine, herbal medicine and therapeutic touch, all of which have become increasingly popular over the last few decades.

Alternative medicine became a great concern to the medical field in the 1980s, according to Angell, when more and more Americans began to partake in its use and because of the lack of scientific evidence to back-up its benefits. That concern rapidly grew in the 1990s when Americans spent over \$40 billion annually on alternative medical treatments.

The enormous growth in the popularity of alternative medicine at a time of great scientific progress can be attributed to several things, according to Angell. "One reason is the antipathy towards the established medical practice," she says.

Patients must often deal with doctors who ignore their concerns, rushed office visits, painful and costly medical procedures, and payment disputes with insurance companies. The growth can also be attributed to the fact that people don't like the complicated issue of science, adds Angell. "It makes your head hurt."

As a result of these unresolved issues, alternative medicine became an attractive choice. "Alternative treatment is user-friendly," says Angell. "People heal themselves ... Alternative medicine makes people feel good no matter who they are and settles some scores with the medical establishment."

Yet unlike traditional medicine, alternative medicine is most often used by people who are not sick. "It appeals to healthy, affluent, well-educated people," she says. For those who are sick, alternative drugs are often preferred over conventional medicine even when the active chemical ingredients are identical. "

Alternative medicines are not scientific," said Angell, "because they have not been tested to see if they work." There is a "disparaging attitude towards evidence" she says. "Many people think "that somehow if you believe something, that makes it true. ... Doctors have an obligation to tell the truth [to their patients]," she adds. In addition, she believes all treatments must be held to the same standards and rigorous scientific testing.

Angell's lecture was part of the university's Visiting Scholar program. During her visit, Angell sat in on JMU classes, toured the campus and visited doctors at Rockingham Memorial Hospital.

*by Kara Carpenter ('00)*