

Leading Health Systems Explore Holistic Care

By: Chuck Green
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In response to patient demand for a holistic-based health care approach, the Cleveland-based Cleveland Clinic has opened the Chinese Herbal Therapy Clinic—one of the first hospital-based herbal therapy clinics in the U.S. According to Jamie Starkey, lead acupuncturist at the Cleveland Clinic’s Center for Integrative Medicine, the goal of the clinic is twofold: provide in-demand, natural options for medical treatment and preventative care, and safely monitor patients’ herb use.

Key Takeaways

- Cleveland-based Cleveland Clinic opened the Chinese Herbal Therapy Clinic, being one of the first hospital-based herbal therapy clinics in the U.S.
- The holistic approach can be problematic for health care marketers because natural doesn’t always mean safe.
- At the Chinese Herbal Therapy Clinic, patients are required to have physician referrals.

But the holistic approach, says Starkey, can be problematic for health care marketers. “Natural doesn’t mean safe,” she says. “When

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[products] are marketed as natural, people assume they come from the earth, so they must not have bad properties, but that's not necessarily true."

Starkey emphasizes the need for patient oversight. Chinese herbal medicine is an individualized prescription and should be administered only by a board-certified Chinese herbal medicine practitioner who obtains herbs from a reputable supplier and frequently monitors a patient's condition, she says.

At the Chinese Herbal Therapy Clinic, patients are required to have physician referrals. The doctors and integrative medicine specialists oversee each patient's herbal history, while certified Chinese herbal therapists prescribe herbal blends based on symptoms. In addition to prescribing holistic treatment, patients are also monitored for liver and kidney function through routine blood work, says Starkey.

Theresa Callard-Moore, CEO and founder of MyHolisticApproach.com, a grassroots effort to unite the holistic health care community, says marketers should root their messaging in historical and educational significance. "Go back to where it all started and then quote the research on those herbs today and their effectiveness," she says. "Always keep in mind possible state laws on who can distribute them."

According to Joel Cooper, vice president of strategic planning at Milford, Mass.-based Integrative Medicine Strategist and board member of the Holistic Medicine and Integrative Association, many in the traditional medicine community are skeptical of holistic medicine. To help overcome its reputation, Cooper suggests incorporating mechanisms from traditional medicine in order to protect patients and regulate care, such as monitoring for side effects. But, he says, the widespread integration of herbal therapies into traditional medicine likely will remain elusive, at least for now.

"Every day, there's been change and a movement [toward holistic care]," Cooper says. "It's beginning to take hold, but it could be decades before it really is part of everyone's [regimen]."

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