

Nun Study Leads to New Medical Center

By Marc Kennedy, special to WMJ

As integrative medicine gains acceptance, more evidence is emerging concerning its success. And in Wisconsin, a study involving 35 nuns at the Congregation of St. Agnes in Fond du Lac not only demonstrated the value of an integrative medical approach, it also helped to launch a new clinic devoted to integrative medicine.

"We began with 55 to 60 elderly nuns in the study, from 75 to 101 years old," said Rose Kumar, MD, a Stanford-trained board certified internal medicine specialist who conducted the study with her husband, Scott Woodley, PhD, a Northwestern-trained licensed clinical psychologist. "They had a significant number of gastrointestinal problems, irritable bowel, hypertension, asthma, arthritis and depression. We worked with the nuns 3 sessions per week, which included stress reduction and comprehensive medical management. I monitored their symptoms while Dr. Woodley addressed stress management. We charted medication usage and medical history and had them fill out a subjective questionnaire that examined their stressors and sense of well-being. The stress reduction program included conscious breathing, mindfulness meditation, tai chi and yoga and cognitive behavioral therapy. Techniques, such as art and

drumming were incorporated, and they were educated in relevant women's issues and other health topics applicable to their lives and their symptomatology.

"After 3 weeks, 20 of them left the study, due to difficulty with compliance with the schedule," said Kumar. "This became the control group, and about 35 nuns remained in the experimental group. Nearly all of them responded beneficially. The canes many of them used virtually went away as their balance improved. One nun who was on chronic oxygen for asthma discontinued it, as her blood oxygen saturation increased. Dosages of gastrointestinal medication went down, irritable bowel symptoms improved, inhaler use went down, and the subjective indicators of well-being showed significant improvement."

Six months after the study was completed, Kumar and Woodley established the Ommani Center for Integrative Medicine in Pewaukee.

"We incorporate cognitive behavioral therapy and health and behavior modification in addition to conventional medicine," said Kumar. "When you teach people how to improve their lifestyle and live from a place of meaning, they get healthier. So far, we have observed blood pressure decreases in hypertensive



Rose Kumar, MD

patients, significant improvement in depression and anxiety, improved blood sugar control, weight loss and improvement in people's general state of well-being.

"We don't see this approach as an alternative to conventional medicine. We integrate well-established approaches to health and well-being with standard-of-care medicine. We have an acupuncturist and nutritionist who can help patients with chronic conditions and provide nutrition education, as well as a massage therapist. We are all working from the same intention: to help, empower patients, to educate them to live well. We help them identify the disharmony in their lives. We look at deeper aspects of their lives without losing sight of good medical management."

Kumar added that stress reduction, Dr. Woodley's specialty, is a key in helping patients lead healthier lives.

"Stress is the most underrated factor in the health care system," she said. "It is a primary risk factor for many medical conditions, which explains why people do so well when it's addressed as part of the treatment."

Many are already getting the message, as the Ommani Center has a growing list of individual as well as corporate clients.

"The insurance industry and corporations benefit from a clinic like ours," said Kumar. "It keeps medical costs down and improves health and well-being. We have to look at multiple factors in a patient's life that may be contributing to their symptoms.

The key factor in this century is stress. If it is addressed, along with a patient's lifestyle and medical condition, they feel empowered and have better health outcomes.

"Malpractice costs have gone up as has the burnout rate amongst physicians, as a result of the philosophy of the current health care model," Kumar continued. "If we can continue to demonstrate through outcome research and cost analysis that an integrative approach works beneficially, then we can begin to integrate this into our current health care paradigm safely and scientifically. Our goal is to create a research institute and get NIH grants to do continued evidence-based research."

"We're passionate about having

our health care system expand itself into a meaningful model. I don't see this as competing with conventional medicine. We see our model as inclusive and collaborative. When medicine is approached from this perspective, our physicians, patients and our health care system itself will be healthier."



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