

Letter to the Editor

Dear Editor,

As one of the growing universal concerns, the issue of what is usually known, as complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) was truly targeted by and debated in recent issues of Archives of Iranian Medicine.¹⁻³ Using the title of “Traditional Medicine” and also the Persian corresponding word for “alternative” (*Jaygozin*) may be a source of misunderstanding for public and even biomedical professionals in Iran. Usually the best title is the one with the best consistency with definition. Definition of CAM has been a source of disagreement. Some people tend to unify the medicine as a scientific discipline and reject the classification of medicine into modern/mainstream/contemporary on one hand, and complementary/ alternative/ traditional on the other hand, e.g. a former editor of the New England Journal of Medicine argues: “...There cannot be two kinds of medicine – conventional and alternative...”⁴

The second option could be categorizing medical discipline into the 2 above-mentioned categories and giving this debated category a separate title. Here, using of the title “traditional” medicine may be problematic and even misleading. It could be argued that being “traditional” does not add any value on any practice, e.g. many pre-Islamic social traditions were prohibited, rejected and even criminalized by Islam. (It does not seem to be necessary to mention that here I do not imply the jurisprudential meaning of tradition in Fiqh that is a source of normativity for Muslims). Then it could be said that being only “traditional” cannot morally or scientifically justify using claims or practices. In this sense, traditional medicine must firstly find its justifications based on accepted ethical/technical framework, e.g. it should be examined based on accepted ethical/technical norms/standards of biomedical practice, such as having acceptable harm/benefit balance and being used by considering the ethical rule of informed consent. Therefore any traditional practice may not be applied to any person unless it passes standard assessment, and because standardly assessed interventions are simply known as “medicine”, so the using the title of “traditional medicine” for such practices is not inspiring and satisfactory.

Another title “complementary” implies that these interventions/practices should complete the standard contemporary medicine. Logically a complementary part is truly conceptualized only when the main context (here standard medicine) is accepted and fully considered. Furthermore, the completing part should be naturally consistent with the main part. Then using the title of “complementary” for any intervention could be justified only if that practice fulfill two criteria: firstly the target person, e.g. the patient, should receive the standard medical care secondly such

interventions should be supported by minimum level of ethical/technical evidences including not imposing unacceptable levels of harm to the patient on one hand, and respecting the patients’ dignity and autonomy through being ensured of obtaining a standard “informed consent” with emphasize on the “complementary” nature of such interventions, on the other hand.

But the other title: “alternative”, requires more sophistication, especially in Iranian context. Literally, “alternative” in the context of CAM means: existing outside of/reflecting different values from established/mainstream systems.⁵ Anyone does not realize the concept of “replacing”, while the correspondent use of this word in today Farsi language “*Jaygozin*”, gives the sense that standard medical practice can be a substituted by another kind of practice. This issue is problematic from an ethical point of view because such meaning is misleading for public who may think that such “*Jaygozin*” practices can replace the standard medical care. So such “alternative” practices could be ethically offered to the society and individuals only if the concept of “being alternative” is correctly explained. In summary, “CAM” seems to be a better title than “traditional medicine”, if we can find a better corresponding word in Farsi for “alternative”.

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