Media and complementary medicines

In the sixth article in a series on complementary medicine, Edzard Ernst questions the affect the media has on the reputation of these treatments.

The British public are voting with their feet and wallets in favour of complementary medicine (CM), and it is mainly through this grass-roots movement that pharmacists, doctors and other conventional health care professionals take any notice of CM at all. This simple but undeniable fact has several important ramifications, not least the “undue influence” of the media over CM.1

It is difficult today to find a newspaper that does not contain one or two articles on CM. Nearly all the Sunday papers and women’s magazines have regular columns on the subject, many of them written by journalists rather than health care professionals. Almost without exception, these amount to uncritical, often ill-informed praise of CM. Comparing articles on CM in four leading British papers (The Times, The Independent, The Daily Telegraph and The Guardian) with those in the four leading German papers, we showed that, in the UK, much more attention was focused on CM (see Table).2 In addition, compared with articles dealing with mainstream medicine, the tone was remarkably positive.

Electronic information

More and more people are turning towards electronic media for information on health matters1 but we have shown, repeatedly, that the majority of websites advising consumers on CM are promoting therapies which are not evidence-based. Many of these are overtly misleading to the point where health is put at risk.4,5 Uncritical, often commercially motivated promotion of CM by the print and electronic media seems to have become the rule rather than the exception. Its consequences should not be underestimated.

Politicians are probably more likely to read the daily papers than The Lancet or The Pharmaceutical Journal. They are thus exposed to an unbalanced view on CM. It is conceivable, even likely, that this incessant exposure to exaggerations and half-truths will influence major health care decisions in the UK. Recent news about moves towards the integration of unproven treatments into the NHS well under way.6

Trial by media

Furthermore, I fear that this “trial by media” will have harmful effects for CM itself. However one defines CM, it is quite undeniably medicine. Trivialising it day in day out in the media has the potential to turn it gradu-