

**More Harm than Good? The Moral Maze of Complementary and Alternative Medicine**  
**Edzard Ernst and Kevin Smith**

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**A DROP IN THE OCEAN**

This is an examination of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) from an ethical perspective. The authors attack the edifice of CAM from a number of angles, exploring in turn competence, research, education, informed consent, truth, and exploitation. In every case their verdict is the same: CAM is guilty of ethically

reprehensible practices.

In the chapter devoted to 'Truth', they assert that it can never be sufficient for healthcare practitioners to act merely in good faith: they have a moral duty to provide treatment that is based on sound evidence and theory. When reliable research fails to show any specific benefit, CAM's adherents resort to various tactics. These include claims that CAM is not susceptible to conventional research; that a 'new scientific paradigm' is required or that 'science' itself is a subjective concept and no more valid than alternative ways of looking at phenomena; that because CAM is safer than mainstream medicine this in itself justifies its practice; and, finally, that critics of CAM have vested interests in attacking it and cannot be trusted. Such special pleading cuts no ice with Ernst and Smith, and they conclude that:

*'The truth-violating nature of CAM renders it immoral in both theory and practice.'*

The text is replete with both theoretical and real-life examples and is thoroughly

referenced, but is a rather turgid read. It clearly demonstrates the extraordinary capacity of intelligent beings, including both practitioners and patients, to hold to irrational beliefs in the face of contrary evidence, but the authors show little sympathy for this very human tendency. In a key passage the authors discuss the ethics of knowingly making use of the placebo effect; I believe many CAM practitioners, even those medically qualified, would defend such practice. Ernst and Smith find it paternalistic, undermining of autonomy, and dishonest, and thus ethically unacceptable. I know many sensible people who seek CAM treatments; I also number a handful of CAM practitioners, all of them moral beings, among my acquaintances. I doubt that any of them would have their minds changed by reading this book.

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