

Why Would a Medical Doctor Embrace an Unproven Treatment?

The curious case of NAET.

May 8, 2013 By David Villano

Face down on a massage table, a 30-something corporate attorney grips a tiny vial of clear liquid and breathes deeply, again and again. My wife, Kathryn, an internal medicine specialist whose practice focuses on the arcane arts of alternative healing, presses her thumbs on each side of the woman's neck and moves slowly down her spine. The woman suffers from chronic fatigue, nasal congestion, and a severely runny nose, which conventional medical treatments have failed to cure. So she's come to see Kathryn.

A few weeks later, after a handful of similar treatments, the woman calls to report the results: All of her symptoms have dramatically improved.

The woman is dumbfounded, as am I. When I press Kathryn to explain how these maladies could be cured with what looks to me like voodoo medicine, she shrugs: "It works. What can I say?"

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Kathryn isn't the only conventionally trained doctor who works at the crossroads of evidence-based Western medicine and alternative therapies that often defy explanation and sometimes contradict established medical science. Such treatments aren't as unusual as they used to be, of course—according to the National Center for Health Statistics, 38 percent of Americans use some kind of complementary or alternative medicine, from acupuncture to tai chi.

But the treatment Kathryn used on the lawyer is a particularly notorious example. It's called Nambudripad's allergy elimination techniques, or NAET. The mainstream medical journal *Current Allergy & Clinical Immunology* recently dubbed it "the most unsubstantiated allergy treatment proposed to date." Quackwatch.com, a one-man medical watchdog site run by a retired doctor, calls NAET a "combination of abuse and larceny" and encourages anybody encountering a practitioner to file a complaint with the state attorney general.

Such warnings are less troubling to Kathryn than to me, a journalist and, by nature, somewhat of a skeptic. The bottom line for Kathryn, at 47 a sober and experienced clinician, is that she believes NAET works. NAET, she says, cured her of a lingering gastrointestinal illness and provided withdrawal-free relief from cigarette addiction. That triggered a switch for her. She left a cushy job as director of medical services for the Miami-Dade County jail system for the uncertainty of a private, solo practice integrating Western medicine with acupuncture, nutritional medicine, and other alternative therapies. "I felt I had an obligation to help people in a way that other physicians

were not,” says Kathryn, dressed in sandals, white jeans, and a loose flower-print blouse in her sun-dappled Miami office.

NAET is rooted in principles of Chinese medicine. Its founder, Devi Nambudripad, a 68-year-old, Indian-born chiropractor in Los Angeles, believes that virtually all disease and illness, and even developmental disorders, including autism, are caused when the electromagnetic signature of allergens—food, chemicals, hormones, proteins, other substances—disrupts energy flow within the body. (The attorney, says Kathryn, was allergic to a range of foods and spices.)

Therapy is simple and can be far less expensive than traditional treatment: controlled exposure to the allergen (typically in a vial) along with an acupressure treatment. Kathryn has trained under Nambudripad, who says that more than 10,000 people worldwide have taken her training, including many other MDs.

The Nambudripad website, and Devi Nambudripad’s several books, are filled with statistics that portray NAET as a low-cost miracle cure: a 98 percent success rate for 1,127 patients treated for arthritis; 98 percent for 1,243 headache patients; 98 percent for 390 patients with depression. The list goes on—relief for everything from indigestion to insomnia, anxiety to asthma. I ask Nambudripad’s son Roy, an MD who works with her, about these numbers. He surprises me by essentially dismissing them, citing a lack of scientific controls.

The Nambudripads are working to generate more rigorous proof. A year ago, Devi co-authored a study on NAET’s impact on children with autism: It found that after a one-year regimen of NAET, 23 of 30 children scored high enough on autism measurement scales to return to a normal classroom setting, while none returned from the control group. The study appeared in *Integrative Medicine: A Clinician’s Journal*—peer reviewed, but hardly *The New England Journal of Medicine*, which, along with other top medical journals, declined to publish the study.

I hear Kathryn factoring in the dearth of hard science as she advises her patients on their treatment options. “I know this sounds crazy,” she tells them before describing NAET.

“I don’t recommend it to everybody,” she tells me. “Only people I think would be open to something we can’t easily understand.” But she did recently remove NAET from her website’s list of services. She prefers that patients find her by word of mouth—the MD who does weird stuff.

About David Villano

David Villano is an award-winning, Miami-based journalist who has contributed to dozens of publications, including *The Miami Herald*, *South Florida Sun-Sentinel*, *Newsweek*, *Mother Jones* and the *Columbia Journalism Review*.