

# Who is more equal?

In George Orwell's *Animal Farm* we discover a basic truth, that although all characters (animals who are of course surrogate humans) are equal, some are more equal than others. This observation invariably raises a wry smile, and a shared realization that it reflects a basic truth in human society.

A recent focus group, assembled by an emerging e-commerce organization, threw up something similar. The group comprised an assortment of 10 or so therapists and practitioners, whose views and opinions were being sought on a variety of issues. Reporting on the gathering, one of the organizers noted that, 'They said there was no hierarchy in complementary medicine, although their actions and body language clearly communicated something very different — the doctor/homeopath was listened to, and almost revered, whilst the aromatherapists were ignored.' A medical colleague reports that the same sort of attitude pervades medicine, so that a psychiatrist with skills in dealing with learning disorders, for example, would not receive the same deference as would a cardiac surgeon.

None of this was too surprising but it did lead me to question my own attitude to professions and professionals from other disciplines in complementary and alternative medicine (CAM). There seems to be

an inherently greater degree of respect (not always well founded) for anyone who has studied long and hard to achieve a particular qualification. This may relate to a probably valid assumption that 7 to 10 years of study and training count for something in terms of the opinions being offered. It does after all seem reasonable to assume that the ability to think, and reflect, and form cogent opinions is more likely to be refined over a lengthy period compared with a short one.

Of course, much would depend on the topic being considered as to whether the opinion of a doctor/homeopath is more or less relevant compared with that of an aromatherapist (to stay with the examples given). One would certainly know more about volatile essential oils and their properties than the other, however, there would also commonly be a difference in their degree of knowledge as to pathophysiology. The individual's prejudices and preconceptions also enter into the equation, and while these may be reinforced during a lengthy training, as compared with a shorter one, balanced perhaps by the fact that a longer period of time also allows for the process of reflection and reevaluation of fixed positions.

But human nature is what it is, and in a focus group of this sort, a leadership role is often conferred on (often without discussion), and is assumed, without permission being sought, by the most highly trained—irrespective of the qualification. This

is not to say that such a hierarchical split will be readily acceptable to all those present, however, dissidence and rebellion rarely emerge instantly, but rumble and bubble to the surface over time, as the individualistic nature of particular CAM practitioners is asserted.

The observations above are general, sweeping and largely subjective, based on over 40 years of attending meetings and gatherings, involving a huge array of different therapists and practitioners, around the world. These observations also touch on something worth noting, the difference between those methods, systems, practices and approaches which are comprehensive, and those which are narrowly focused. Osteopathy, traditional chinese medicine/acupuncture, psychotherapy, homeopathy, herbal medicine, naturopathy, chiropractic (and other systems I have neglected to list) approach the human condition from the perspective that, almost irrespective of the nature of the health problem, the methodology incorporated in their method of care, can assist in recovery from, or can alleviate, ill health and suffering. The training for these is therefore automatically more lengthy.

More limited approaches, such as massage therapy, aromatherapy, nutritional counselling, reflexology (and other systems I have neglected to list) might be considered by many to have an apparently narrower focus, and a demonstrably shorter training. Does this make these

methods of lesser importance in the grand scheme of health care? Evidence suggests this not to be the case.

In her excellent compilation of research studies involving massage (Fields 2000), Tiffany Fields PhD has shown the often profound impact of therapeutic massage on a range of conditions including retarded growth in infants, a variety of acute and chronic pain syndromes, attention deficit disorders, depression and anxiety, as well as autoimmune and immune disorders and conditions. If massage can achieve such results, then aromatherapy (massage plus use of essential oils, i.e. herbal medicine using olfactory rather than ingestion pathways) should also be able to demonstrate efficacy in health enhancement. Where does this leave the hierarchical split between highly trained and those with a 'lesser'

training (in terms of time spent training at least)? Doubtless there is an optimum degree of training required for a massage therapist to achieve the competencies needed to effectively and safely perform their work (although this seems to range from over 2000 hours in Canada to under 500 hours elsewhere!), just as there is for the doctor-homeopath to achieve the competencies required for that form of practice. The nature of the work determines the level of training required.

If it takes a year or two to become an excellent massage or aromatherapist, with adequate knowledge of contraindications, and when and how to treat, and when not to treat, this does not make them a lesser therapist or practitioner, than the individual who has taken 7 to 10 years to learn the intricacies of their methodology. What it might do is highlight the

differences in knowledge, for example in relation to anatomy, physiology and pathophysiology. If this could be shown to increase the risk of inappropriate treatment then the demand for a lengthier training, and for a longer list of competencies, would be appropriate. If no such risks attach to a shorter more focused specialist training in massage or aroma-therapy — then the hierarchy demonstrated at the focus meeting should evoke the same shrug and smile as the *Animal farm* analogy — all therapists and practitioners are equal, only some are more equal than others.

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#### REFERENCE

Fields T 2000 *Touch Therapy*. Churchill Livingstone, Edinburgh