

Wellness & Integrative Medicine  
Webcast  
October 23, 2007  
Melinda Ring, MD

Please remember the opinions expressed on Patient Power are not necessarily the views of Northwestern Memorial Hospital, its medical staff or Patient Power. Our discussions are not a substitute for seeking medical advice or care from your own doctor. That's how you'll get care that's most appropriate for you.

**Andrew:**

Hello. This is Andrew Schorr. Welcome once again to one of our Patient Power programs on [healthnet.nmh.org](http://healthnet.nmh.org), the Northwestern Memorial Hospital website where every two weeks we cover an important topic.

So we've talked about surgeries, and transplantation and all sorts of chronic conditions. And typically our guests almost always are MDs but always people with extensive medical backgrounds. And then you think about, well, how you approach your health. And you wonder about beyond surgical procedures, prescriptions medicines what can you do to make a difference in your health. And then you start to hear these terms like alternative medicine or complementary medicine or integrative medicine. Well, Northwestern Memorial is very aware of that, and for ten years or so they've had a center for integrative medicine at Northwestern, and the medical director is with us today, Dr. Melinda Ring. Now, she's an M.D. She's very devoted to this topic.

Dr. Ring, thanks for being with us.

**Dr. Ring:**

Thanks so much for having me!

**Andrew:**

So what does integrative medicine mean? Tell us about your center. What's its focus and how does it come together with all the other medical resources that Northwestern has?

**Dr. Ring:**

Well, integrative medicine in general refers to taking the best of Western medicine and combining it with practices that come from other cultural systems. So for us what that means is that people come here, they will see an internist who has training in internal medicine and in addition is very open or specifically trained in complementary and alternative medicine practices. Some patients are self referred; some of them come on a physician's recommendation. We will help them develop a plan, a real lifestyle plan that puts together what they're already doing with their Western medicine and look at what else they can be doing to round out their wellness.

**Andrew:**

Let's look at one example of that. There are literally millions of people for example with chronic pain. And we have done programs certainly with experts in chronic pain, so certainly the anesthesiologists and I know there are pain clinics, you may have this procedure, that procedure, this nerve block, or that block. But also you could have acupuncture, for example. So that might be an approach. Would a specialist like you say let's see how all this can come together to help someone where maybe their pain has not been resolved in other ways?

**Dr. Ring:**

Absolutely. With integrative medicine the goal is to not just treat symptoms, but also work in a preventive fashion and do things as noninvasively as possible. So maybe down the line surgery might be necessary, but let's see what else we can do beforehand. And for somebody who's coming in with pain there can be a wide range of things that might help them. Like you mentioned, acupuncture, energy medicine, specific massage therapeutic techniques, even dietary sorts of things where somebody takes on an anti-inflammatory type diet can help reduce pain. So we would look at the whole range. There are so many things people can do to help themselves.

**Andrew:**

Now, one of the problems in this whole area has been--so we have prescription medicines that go through rigorous testing and FDA review and have to be defended before the FDA will approve them, but the problem in supplements, let's say, and some of these things that you can get at the health food stores, a lot of them have not been tested that way or it's sort of a mixed bag and purity is questioned. Sometimes there may be good substances but then it's made available by a bunch of companies. Not everybody that exacting standard and I personally think that's sort of shot that industry in the foot.

How do you help people get other products that may not be prescription medicines that are helpful and are brought together for their benefit? How do you sort through all that in evidence based medicine, I guess you'd call it.

**Dr. Ring:**

Right. We try to use what evidence there is out there. And in my mind there are many different types of evidence. Of course, there is the beloved double-blind, placebo-controlled trial. If we can have those to look at supplements, that's great. But I think we also need to look at the more experiential or cultural type of evidence. So cultures who have used certain supplements for a thousand years, you know, there's a reason that they're using that sort of supplement. So evidence is one area in choosing supplements.

And then, like you mentioned, the other one is getting a quality supplement. Since dietary supplements are not FDA regulated, making sure that you get a supplement that has what the label says it has in it, and that does not have contaminants is very important. So when somebody comes in we'll first determine what supplements are appropriate for their particular condition but then also help define what makes a good quality supplement.

Currently there are four different approval ratings. There's the Good Housekeeping rating, the Consumerlab.com rating and the USP and NSF ratings. These rating systems do not mean: okay, this supplement will definitely work, but it does say this is a supplement which contains what it's supposed to contain. So to me that's a good starting point for at least making sure people are taking what they think they are taking.

**Andrew:**

Okay. Let's rattle off some of the modalities that you use. So we mentioned acupuncture along the way. And I think you were maybe alluding to Chinese herbal medicine when we maybe don't have the FDA studies but we have hundreds of years of history with some of these substances and millions of people who have used them effectively. So we have that. We have various relaxation approaches, right? We have tai chi and is it Qigong, I think. So there are approaches like that. What are other approaches that you consider when you look at the whole person and wellness in integrative medicine?

**Dr. Ring:**

In addition to those?

**Andrew:**

Yeah.

**Dr. Ring:**

Okay. So other modalities would be... when I try to come up with a treatment plan for somebody I use as the basis the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, that's the division of the NIH. They created a classification system for the complementary and alternative therapies.

The first one is biologic therapies. That includes nutrition and supplements. We talked a little bit about that.

The next one would be cultural therapies or whole healing systems like Traditional Chinese Medicine, Ayurvedic medicine, Homeopathy. Those fall into that category.

The third category would be manual therapies. So that might include chiropractic, osteopathic manipulation and then the whole variety of massage therapies. I think people typically think of a Swedish massage or a relaxing massage that they get at

the spa, but there's so many different other types. Neuromuscular massage, manual lymphatic drainage, all different types of therapies that can benefit different conditions. So those all fall into that third category.

The fourth category is energy medicine. And this is probably one of the more controversial areas among scientists. In energy medicine the theory is that people have an energy field around or in them, and that disturbances in that energy field lead to disease. So when a healer comes in, and that might be somebody trained in Reiki, craniosacral therapy, healing touch, by placing their hands in or on a client's body that they can then effect an improvement in somebody's energy field. This is in the fourth category and one that I'm actually very fond of. I think it can be very helpful.

And then the fifth category and the last one is mind-body medicine. And like you alluded to, this includes things like relaxation therapies, guided imagery, progressive muscle relaxation; all of those things that help tap into the mind-body connection.

**Andrew:**

Okay. Now let's fire off some questions at you that we've gotten. So this one is from Sherry in Chicago, and she writes in, "I've been researching integrative medicine online and keep running across--" something you mentioned, Doctor, "Ayurvedic medicine. What is this and how does it relate to integrative medicine?"

**Dr. Ring:**

Ayurvedic medicine is again a whole system of therapies that developed outside of Western medicine. It includes diet, it includes breath work, specific supplements, all those sorts of things. Ayurvedic medicine is the traditional healing system from India. It is a component of integrative medicine, so it's something we might use to complement or alongside of what we're doing with Western medicine.

**Andrew:**

Okay. I wanted to go back to chronic pain for a minute just because it's out there so much. I think we have all had chronic pain at some time.

**Dr. Ring:**

We have all had pain.

**Andrew:**

We all have it. So Lisa from Chicago said, "I'm considering complementary and alternative therapies to deal with chronic pain. What's the best way to approach this with my rheumatologist?"

**Dr. Ring:**

Of course, as a physician I'm always thinking you need to talk to your physician about what you're doing. In most cases I find that physicians are open to patients using it. They may just not be comfortable recommending it themselves. I think by opening the discussion and saying, "You know, I was wondering what you think about me trying acupuncture or something else to help me with my pain?" That's the sort of thing that can open the door for the discussion.

One of the benefits of having a center affiliated with a medical system, like ours is with Northwestern, often makes other medical practitioners feel more comfortable with their patients using those practices because it has some oversight and some quality assurance associated with it.

**Andrew:**

So therefore if they're a Northwestern patient they may have rheumatologists at Northwestern Memorial and then they also may be your patient or some member of your team with integrative medicine and it can all work together.

**Dr. Ring:**

Absolutely. We're all about communicating back to the physician. And we often see patients whose primary care doctor is not affiliated with Northwestern but who come in from outside the city or even outside the state.

**Andrew:**

Okay. Here's another big area, and that is menopause. So Cindy from Oak Park, Illinois writes in, "Is there any evidence that natural progesterone cream is beneficial controlling menopausal symptoms or even preventing osteoporosis?"

**Dr. Ring:**

So the whole area of perimenopause and hormone replacement therapy has been a hot topic. My own personal preference, and I think the current recommendations for menopause therapy support it, are that it's no longer an all or nothing proposition. Some women benefit from hormone therapy, and in that case they should receive it because hormones are definitely the most effective at treating perimenopausal symptoms. In my own practice I do recommend some bio-identical hormones, which would include a natural progesterone cream, but again only for those women whom I feel would benefit. It's again not an across the board, "Oh, you're in perimenopause, you need to take a hormone."

The use of progesterone can be helpful for many women who are in their 30s and 40s because progesterone starts to go down before estrogen and you get this relative estrogen dominant picture. In that case using a progesterone supplement can help balance out the hormones. There is also some evidence that progesterone can be helpful for osteoporosis. I would caution, however, that even though it is bio-identical, and you can get it over the counter, that it is still a medication and

therefore should be monitored by a physician. Women can have testing done to measure all of the different female hormones and monitor how they are responding. So yes, I think there is a great benefit to using it (progesterone cream) for many women but that it should be done with some oversight.

**Andrew:**

Let's talk about that for a little bit. Let's go back to the woman going to her rheumatologist. Many people go to their doctor and maybe they're getting heavy-duty treatments, maybe, let's say, in rheumatology. If you had rheumatoid arthritis you might even be getting a biologic medicine. And people are also searching for additional ways to help themselves. And sometimes they're reticent to discuss supplements they may be taking or other approaches, something their neighbor told them about, with their M.D., but it sounds like having that open communication is really important.

**Dr. Ring:**

Oh, it's critical. Like I said, I consider supplements active just like medications. Many of our medications came from herbs, and there is growing awareness of herb-medication interactions. So for sure telling your doctor what you're taking is critically important even if your doctor cannot be the person to recommend what you take.

**Andrew:**

Good point. Here's a question we got from Mary in Chicago and it goes back to what we were discussing earlier about acupuncture. She writes, "Do I have to be ill to benefit from acupuncture, and if not how frequently do I need to come in to benefit from acupuncture treatment?"

**Dr. Ring:**

Many integrative therapies are preventive, and acupuncture is something many people find helps balance them, helps promote wellness. In terms of how often somebody would need to come and get it, it's really individual. This is something that we have to step back from our traditional way of looking at health and look at it from another perspective. In Traditional Chinese Medicine when you go in to get a diagnosis you will have your tongue looked at, your pulse palpated for a long time, give an extensive history and receive a diagnosis but from a Traditional Chinese Medicine perspective. So in terms of how often you need your treatment, that's something that would have to be determined along with the practitioner who's providing the acupuncture.

To put that in a different way, if three people who had heartburn went to see a Traditional Chinese Medicine doctor they would not receive the same therapy. Unlike Western medicine where they might all receive a proton pump inhibitor to

help block acid and they'd all receive the same prescription, those three people would probably receive three totally separate diagnoses from a Traditional Chinese Medicine perspective.

**Andrew:**

That's fascinating. Now I have a question. My dad suffered for a long time from prostate cancer. He had his prostate removed, and along the way it was recommended to him--and I don't remember from where--but maybe there were some Chinese herbs that could be used in that situation. And certainly people with cancer wonder about that. What's your thoughts on related to cancer treatments and where Chinese medicine can come in?

**Dr. Ring:**

As long as the practitioner is well versed in traditional Chinese herbs and aware of possible interactions I do believe it can be used alongside chemotherapy and radiation therapy, to support somebody and help reduce side effects, and hopefully promote treatment of the cancer and reduction of cancer burden. There are times, though, when certain herbs should not be used, and so, again, it has to be done with somebody who really knows what they're working with and how to manage them alongside traditional therapy.

**Andrew:**

Okay. Well, I know that's an area of discussion, certainly.

Here's a question we got from Beth from Naperville, Illinois, and she says, "I'm 34 and having issues conceiving and I've heard that acupuncture can be helpful related to fertility."

Any thoughts on that, Doctor?

**Dr. Ring:**

Well, Northwestern is currently doing a study looking specifically at that, looking at acupuncture with infertility. We're working with the reproductive endocrinologists at Northwestern. There are many studies that show that there is potential benefit in improving fertility or increasing the rate of conception, and we're hoping that we can show that yes, indeed, those studies hold true. I think it is if you're having trouble conceiving, acupuncture is a great adjuvant therapy.

**Andrew:**

Now, you mentioned clinical studies that you're doing. Is there anyplace where someone can find out what are the areas of integrative medicine that you're exploring and if they want to be in a trial? Because that was news to me, what you mentioned about fertility but sounds fascinating. You know, if my wife were in that situation or maybe me too, we might want to be part of that. So how do we find out?

**Dr. Ring:**

Well, the big storehouse of information for research that's going on in integrative medicine is that National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine that I mentioned earlier. So going to the NCCAM website is a resource for studies that might be interesting to you. There you might find a study on pancreatic cancer and shark cartilage, or looking at Reiki therapy for insomnia. All of those sorts of things can be located on that website.

In terms of what's going on at Northwestern, we're growing our research program and hope to be involved in more and more research over the next year.

**Andrew:**

Okay. Well, certainly if they check in with your integrative center they can ask.

**Dr. Ring:**

Absolutely.

**Andrew:**

Here's a question we've gotten in from Gary from Oak Park, Illinois. He says, "I have multiple sclerosis and spasticity has become bothersome. Is there anything that can benefit me? What about massage?"

**Dr. Ring:**

So, yes, we see many patients who have multiple sclerosis who are trying to manage complications from it, the side effects from medications, and trying to prevent relapses. And massage is certainly one of the ones that can help by improving the muscle elasticity and flexibility. Again, not looking at only that Swedish relaxing massage, but one that's maybe more interactive and involves some flexion exercises and range of motion exercises with the massage therapist.

**Andrew:**

One of the conditions that has been elusive for so many people yet just can be devastating is fibromyalgia. And, of course, for a long time a lot of MDs didn't quite take it seriously. There wasn't a pill you could take. You know all the issues. Can integrative medicine help, and, if so, are there certain modalities you'd point out?

**Dr. Ring:**

Well, that whole spectrum of Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, Fibromyalgia, Multiple Chemical Sensitivity, like you said, it's one that's been frustrating for both clinicians and for the patients because there's such a broad range of symptoms associated with them and not a clear, unifying cause. There are certainly therapies that have been shown to be effective, but it's so individual. Some patients respond extremely well to acupuncture, whereas others find that it exacerbates their symptoms. Working with the sleep problems that occur in many people who have CFS and

fibromyalgia can often help improve other symptoms, too. So looking at ways to improve their sleep through mind-body therapies, through energy medicine, maybe supplements, those are all things to consider in that spectrum of disorders.

**Andrew:**

Do you look into at your center, Dr. Ring, at all--you were mentioning about nutrition. There are food additives, food dyes, certain substances that affect different people differently. We think of it in children but it could be in adults as well. Do you help people investigate that to find things that maybe just are a problem for them, not just in their digestion but in their behavior?

**Dr. Ring:**

Well, in general I would say that at our center we certainly promote that people eat more whole foods, less processed foods, try to eat more organically, avoid xenoestrogens and pesticides. I think that's a pretty across-the-board recommendation. We do have a naturopathic practitioner here, and we both do some functional nutrition testing such as food intolerances to certain types of foods, not a true allergic reaction but maybe a decreased ability to digest it or foods that are creating extra inflammation in your body. There are tests for heavy metal and other exposures. All of those sorts of things can be evaluated.

**Andrew:**

Now, do you see children at all at your center?

**Dr. Ring:**

We don't. This is strictly an adult practice.

**Andrew:**

Right. I understand. I was watching something on CNN. They've been running a series on celiac disease, which I've done, and it sounds like so many people don't know they have it, the gluten intolerance from wheat, barley, rye. So there's a nutritional situation where they may not know it and may not know, even if they are aware and looking for it, that it's hidden in lots of things. One of the things they pointed out is it could even be a binder in some prescription medicines.

**Dr. Ring:**

Oh, absolutely. Gluten intolerance is a huge problem. It is one of the ones that's more recognized by physicians now and they're testing more often. Oftentimes the symptoms are so vague, though, that if you have the classic gastrointestinal loose stools, you're losing weight, developing anemia, vitamin insufficiencies, it's much easier to pick up. But sometimes people have very vague symptoms such as feeling bad and they don't know why, and in that case doing a test for gluten intolerance may be a prudent thing to do.

**Andrew:**

Dr. Ring, I bet it's gratifying that a major medical center like Northwestern Memorial has your Center for Integrative Medicine. A lot don't. And so it looks like you in your own practice and with your team, but maybe the whole medical center now, is looking at the whole person, and to me it sounds like that's the way it should be.

**Dr. Ring:**

Absolutely. PBS came out with a documentary about a year ago called The New Medicine really talking about integrative medicine, and I thought that was kind of funny, because to me integrative medicine is the "old medicine". It's the way medicine was originally practiced, looking at the whole person, taking into account mind, body, spirit, community, all of those other aspects of a person's life; really looking at the relationship between the doctor and the patient as being a healing relationship. And so, yes, it's very gratifying, but to me it's nothing new. It's just the way medicine should be practiced.

**Andrew:**

Amen. Well, I'm delighted that you could be with us today and discussing this. And I think your center can be a wonderful resource for people if you have a chronic condition. Or even, as you said, acupuncture or relaxation, some of these approaches can be preventive, so it can be part of your overall wellness. Dr. Melinda Ring, who is director of the integrative medicine center at Northwestern Memorial, thank you so much for being with us on our Patient Power program.

**Dr. Ring:**

Thank you so much.

**Andrew:**

Just want to mention what is coming up for folks. We're going to be having a discussion on the diagnosis of epileptic and nonepileptic spells in a couple weeks, November 13th, with Dr. Stephen Schuele from Northwestern Memorial.

And of course all our replays are posted on [healthnet.nmh.org](http://healthnet.nmh.org).

And if you want to get in touch with Dr. Melinda Ring and the integrative medicine center you can just go on [nmh.org](http://nmh.org), and that will direct you to there.

Is there any phone number or anything you want to give, Dr. Ring?

**Dr. Ring:**

Well, patients can call our main NMPG patient line. That's at 312-926-DOCS (312-926-3627). And patients are welcome to make an appointment either with me, or directly with a practitioner if they know what service they are seeking.

**Andrew:**

Okay. Thank you very much Dr. Melinda Ring. I'm Andrew Schorr. As we know, knowledge can be the best medicine of all. Certainly consider this as part of your care, integrative medicine, and it's offered at Northwestern Memorial Hospital.

You've been listening to Patient Power on HealthNet brought to you by Northwestern Memorial Hospital. See you next time.

Please remember the opinions expressed on Patient Power are not necessarily the views of Northwestern Memorial Hospital, its medical staff or Patient Power. Our discussions are not a substitute for seeking medical advice or care from your own doctor. That's how you'll get care that's most appropriate for you.