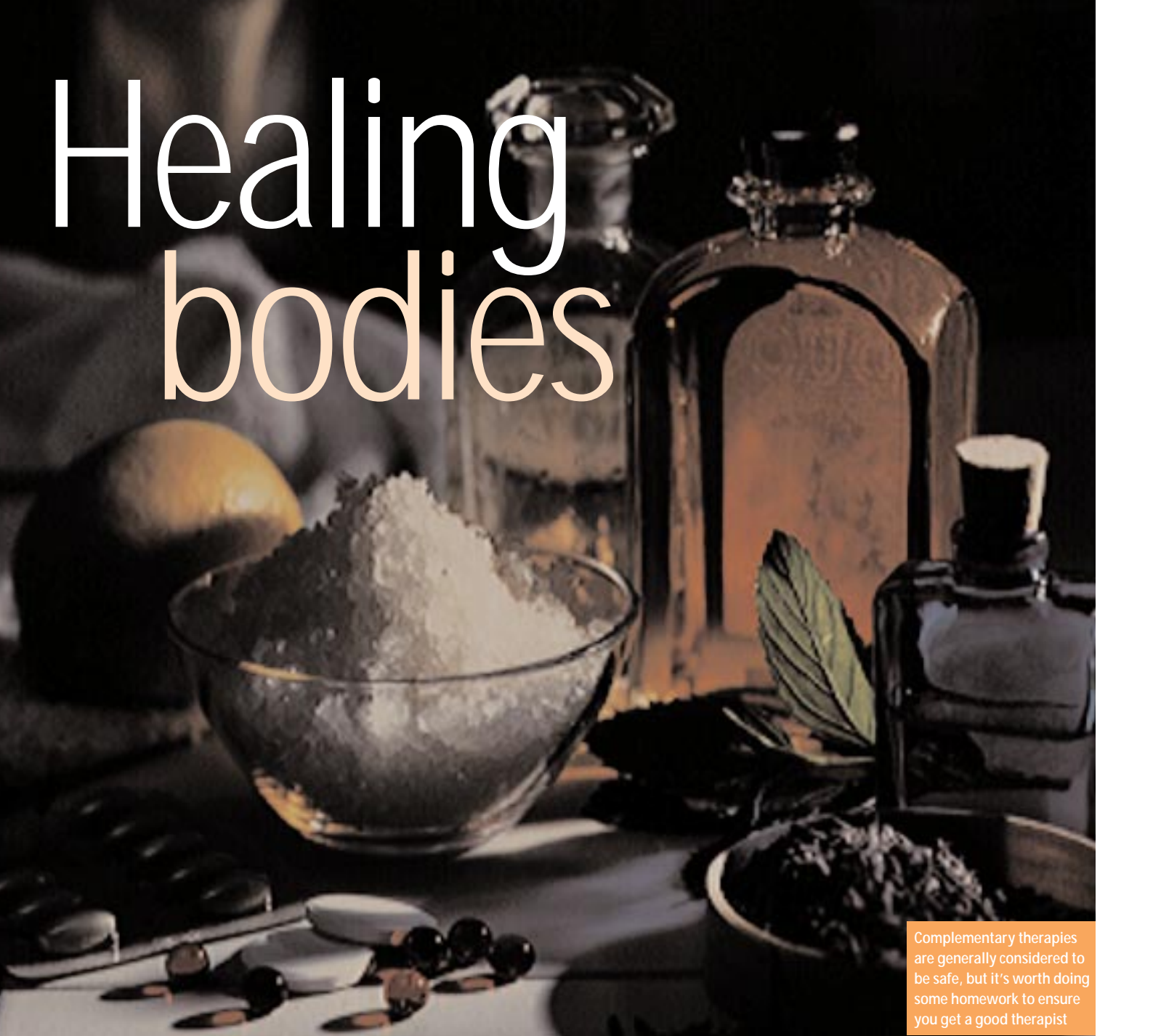




# Healing bodies



Complementary therapies are generally considered to be safe, but it's worth doing some homework to ensure you get a good therapist

## Bodies regulating complementary therapists do not have the powers to protect patients from poor practitioners or help them to get redress

**C**omplementary therapies are becoming increasingly popular. According to the British Complementary Medicine Association, there are now around 40,000 registered complementary therapists in the UK. Indeed, they now outnumber the 36,000 GPs.

Complementary therapies are generally considered to be safe but, as our research shows, the regulatory bodies that govern them have little powers to protect patients if something does go wrong.

### REGULATION OF COMPLEMENTARY THERAPY

To find out how complementary therapies are organised and regulated, we surveyed some of the governing bodies of the more popular therapies (see 'Our research', right). We asked the regulators how much training therapists need before they can be accepted as a member, how they monitor therapists on their regis-

### Our research

We contacted 34 of the bodies, which regulate eight complementary therapies, to find out how they operate. In total, more than 25,000 therapists are registered with these bodies. We chose the most popular therapies: acupuncture, aromatherapy, herbalism, homeopathy, hypnotherapy, massage, osteopathy and reflexology. We also asked the General Chiropractic Council (GCC) about chiropractic.

ters, and how they deal with complaints from patients. Our findings show that regulators have varying standards in the qualifications they require therapists to have before joining – some accept therapists after they've completed a four-day course, while others insist on two-years training or more. They also update their registers at different times – the best monitor them constantly, while others only update the lists every year, which could leave practitioners on the list who are known to be guilty of poor practice. Some complaints procedures were also inadequate and, in three cases, non-existent.

### Voluntary regulation

Most complementary therapies are regulated by one or more voluntary body. The way they are run varies from therapy to therapy. For example, there are at least seven different organisations with which therapists

offering massage can register, so it can be difficult to know which one to call. There are also many different governing bodies that aromatherapists can join, but most come together under the umbrella of the Aromatherapy Organisations Council. The AOC is now in the process of consolidating its registers so, in future, consumers will be able to call just one body to find out about 6,000 aromatherapy practitioners.

### Practitioners' qualifications

In the UK, anyone can set themselves up to practise most complementary therapies without any qualifications. Regulatory bodies usually require a certain level of training before they'll accept therapists as members, but it's not compulsory to join a regulatory body to practise most complementary therapies.

To some extent, the differences in the levels of training required by the regulatory bodies reflects the differences in the therapies themselves. You can practise aromatherapy and reflexology after taking a six-month or year-long course. To join the National Register of Hypnotherapists and Psychotherapists, you can do a part-time course over two years. The British Acupuncture Council says it takes at least two years, full-time training to be an acupuncturist. Homeopaths, osteopaths and chiropractors generally have to complete even longer courses.

Levels of training required by different regulatory bodies within the same therapy can vary too. The Scottish Institute of Reflexology requires 60 hours of lectures and tutorials, while the International Federation of Reflexologists asks for 120 hours. To join the British School of Reflex Zone Therapy, students must be qualified nurses, midwives or other health professionals before commencing their course – which also has 60 hours of lectures.

Variations in training mean that therapists differ considerably in what they can do safely. It is important that they understand their limitations. They need to know when to refer a patient to a more experienced or more qualified therapist, or to a medical practitioner, if necessary.

### Complementary therapies from GPs

Ten per cent of GPs now treat their patients with complementary therapies. Like other complementary medicine therapists, they are not required by law to have training in the therapy they practise. Again, the level of training they have can vary, so it's worth asking about their training before you go ahead with a treatment. For example, some doctors who are members of the British Medical Acupuncture Society may practise a certain level of acupuncture after just an introductory four-day course, while other GP members may have completed a three-year training programme.

### COMMON STANDARDS

National occupational standards for reflexology, aromatherapy and hypnotherapy were introduced last year, and a standard for homeopathy is on the way. ➔

### Charges and sessions

Charges for most complementary therapies range from £15 to £65 for a session, and can last anywhere between 20 minutes and one-and-a-half-hours. The number of sessions required depends on the condition being treated and the therapy you choose. Some problems may be helped by just one or two sessions, but chronic conditions may require regular treatment over many months.

In some parts of the country complementary therapies are available on the NHS, but the number of sessions you can receive free of charge may be limited.

### For more information

The *Which? Guide to Complementary Medicine* (£9.99) assesses around 30 of the most popular therapies, their efficacy, cost, side effects and how to find a reliable practitioner. To order a copy call 0800 252 100 and quote code CMED.

## Health

Our sister magazine *Health* **WHICH?** *Which?* is currently running a series on the efficacy of complementary therapies. For information on how to subscribe, call 0800 252 100.

### WHEN THERAPIES GO WRONG

You may choose a complementary therapy thinking that, because it is natural, it is safer than using modern drugs. In most cases complementary therapies are safe, but there are some risks.

#### Problems with remedies

Some herbal products are classified as medicines and, as such, are licensed and tested for safety. But most are unlicensed, so there may not be strict controls on their quality. Contamination has been a problem with some Chinese herbs. Some herbal treatments and aromatherapy essential oils can have side effects or cause allergies. The Department of Health has identified some products that carry potential risks; pennyroyal and broom may cause miscarriage; and ragwort has been linked to liver damage. Excessive intake of many remedies could be toxic, and little is known about interactions between herbal and conventional medicine.

Some people experience more rather than less pain after osteopathy or chiropractic. Acupuncture has been reported to cause side effects including pain and fainting. And hypnotherapy can occasionally be harmful to people with some psychiatric disorders.

It's best to see your GP before seeing a complementary therapist, otherwise you could delay or miss out on vital treatment. It is also crucial to give a therapist your full medical history. Some conditions or medications may make certain complementary therapies unsuitable for you.

#### Problems with therapists

As with conventional medicine, disagreements can arise between practitioners and patients. For example, practitioners may assess their patient's progress as being much greater than the patient perceives it to be.

#### If you want to complain

- Complain to the practitioner first, in person or in writing, to see if you can come to an arrangement with them.
- If that doesn't resolve the issue, go to their regulatory body, if they belong to one.
- If your practitioner is working within the NHS, you can use the NHS complaints procedure.

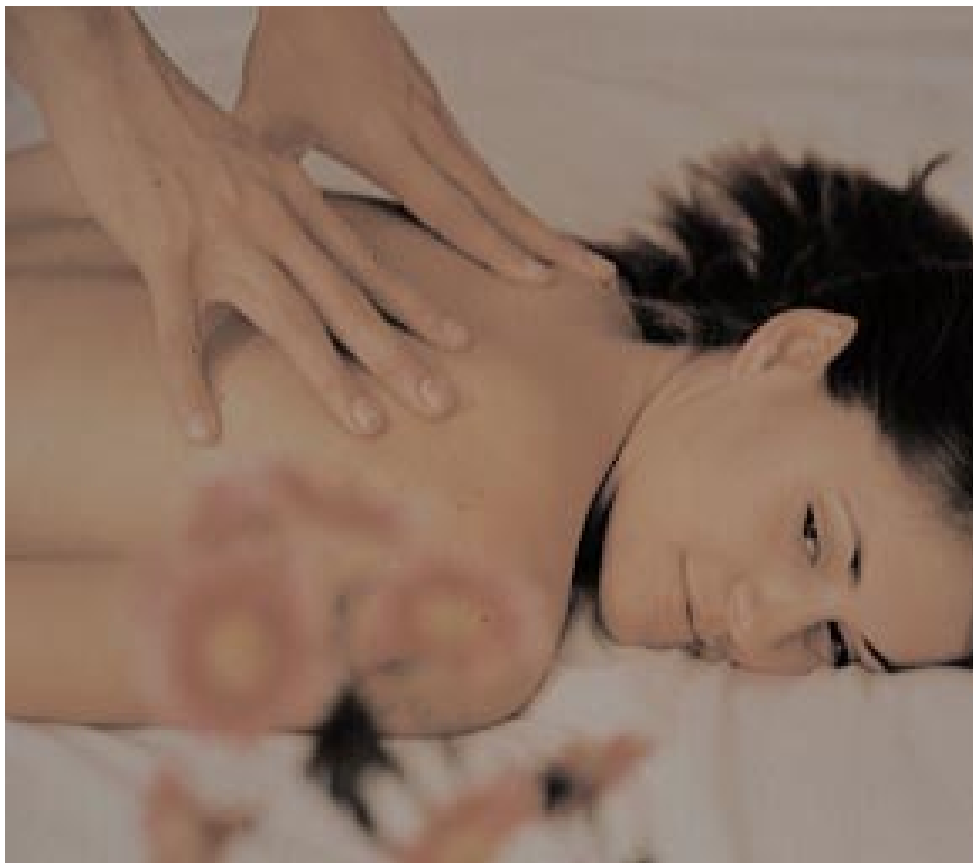
### WHICH? SAYS

Voluntary bodies regulating complementary therapists are not giving patients adequate protection from bad practice. They need more powers to suspend therapists from working while complaints about malpractice are being considered, and powers to stop them practising altogether if they are found guilty of malpractice.

Patients need access to up-to-date registers of practitioners to find out about their qualifications and histories. They should also be made aware of how to complain, in case they need to.

A single regulatory body for each therapy could remedy some of these problems. It could act as a central information point for consumers to call to find a therapist and check up on their qualifications and histories. It could also set common standards of training and qualifications that practitioners must meet.

If you are considering treatment with a complementary therapist, check with their regulator whether they've been subject to disciplinary action, and ask the therapist about their qualifications and experience before agreeing to treatment.



## WHAT YOU CAN DO

It's worth asking a few questions to help you find a good complementary therapist. First, call the regulatory body for your preferred therapy – there may be more than one, so start with one mentioned in 'Finding a therapist', opposite.

Ask the regulator:

- about the content and length of training its members are required to undergo
- for a list of local practitioners
- whether your chosen practitioner is or has been subject to any disciplinary actions.

Once you've found a therapist, ask them about:

- their training and experience
- their professional indemnity insurance
- their experience of your condition
- how many sessions you are likely to need
- the cost of the treatment.

When you have a consultation, make sure the therapist:

- checks your medical history
- explains the treatment
- tells you how you may feel after the treatment
- doesn't guarantee recovery or a cure
- tells you if they cannot help.

These standards outline good practice for therapists, for example, in assessing patients' needs, and specifying the level of knowledge and skill needed to achieve them. They also outline how therapists should be evaluated. These standards should make it easier for consumers to know what to expect from a therapist.

### STATUTORY SELF-REGULATION

Osteopathy and chiropractic are in the process of moving to statutory self-regulation. This means that all osteopaths and chiropractors will have to be members of the General Chiropractic Council or the General Osteopathic Council in order to practise. These bodies will aim to ensure that all practitioners have a common level of skills and qualifications and will be listed under one register. When the legislation is fully implemented (from May 2000 for osteopaths, and June 2001 for chiropractors) it will be illegal for anyone to use the title of osteopath or chiropractor unless they are on the register.

Statutory self-regulation of more complementary therapies would offer consumers better protection from untrained practitioners. The Health Act 1999 has made it simpler for voluntary bodies regulating health professionals or complementary therapists to gain statutory recognition. However, the process takes time and it will probably be several years before we see any new statutory bodies for complementary therapies.

### MONITORING THERAPISTS

All the regulatory bodies we looked at have a code of ethics, which details how practitioners should behave, and explains the limitations within which they should practise. But worryingly, more than half the voluntary regulators we surveyed didn't have an adequate way of ensuring that therapists were following their code of ethics. The International Society of Professional

### Advertising claims

The British Code of Advertising and Sales Promotion states that advertising by complementary therapists should not discourage people from having essential medical treatment; that medicines or therapies for serious or prolonged ailments should not be advertised; and that advertised products or therapies should not claim to be guaranteed to work or be absolutely safe or free of side effects.

We had concerns about one leaflet that we were sent by the Scottish Institute of Reflexology because it made claims to 'help' certain serious medical conditions, such as glaucoma. We will be pursuing this with the Advertising Standards Authority.

Aromatherapists, the British Reflexology Association and the Holistic Association of Reflexologists all said they just relied on complaints. The London School of Sports Massage said it relied on word of mouth.

By contrast, the National Register of Hypnotherapists and Psychotherapists requires members to meet monthly for at least two hours of peer supervision, where they discuss cases with a colleague. This helps practitioners with difficult cases and allows poor performance to be identified so that further training or help can be given. The organisation carries out random checks on one therapist in 20 every year to make sure these meetings have taken place regularly.

### COMPLAINTS PROCEDURES

Disappointingly few of the regulatory bodies we surveyed publicised their disciplinary and complaints procedures to consumers, or specified time scales within which complaints should be resolved. Some organisations, such as the London and Counties Society of Physiologists (which regulates massage therapists), give information about their complaints procedures on their web sites, while others only give information on request. Three of the organisations we surveyed don't have complaints procedure at all.

An explanation of how to complain should be available wherever therapists practise. Most regulatory bodies reported few complaints in the last year, but if patients can't find out how to complain, they may not try. Regulatory bodies could make it easier for patients to complain about their treatment by accepting complaints in person, on the phone, and in writing.

### SANCTIONS

Proper sanctions against problem practitioners – both therapists who practise without qualifications and those who, although qualified, have harmed patients –

are necessary to protect the public. But currently, unless regulatory bodies have statutory recognition, their sanctions are not legally enforceable. For example, the London and Counties Society of Physiologists can suspend a member therapist from its register if investigations find that the therapist may be a danger to the public. But it cannot stop the therapist practising under a different register. Even if a practitioner is struck off all the registers of the regulatory bodies for their therapy, there is still nothing to stop them practising without membership of a body.

Regulatory bodies for complementary therapies do not have powers to discipline doctors. This is the responsibility of the General Medical Council, which can act only if a doctor is convicted of a criminal offence, if there is an allegation of serious professional misconduct, if a doctor's professional performance may be seriously deficient, or if a doctor with health problems continues to practise while unfit.

## REGISTERS OF THERAPISTS

Checking that a therapist is on the register of a reputable regulatory body is generally a good idea. But the frequency with which registers for different regulatory bodies are updated varies, so it is not always a foolproof way of finding a good therapist.

Some organisations, including the Holistic Association of Reflexologists, the Academy of On Site Massage and the British Federation of Massage Practitioners, claim to update their registers daily. Others, like the General Osteopathic Council, provide access to up-to-date web sites. But about a quarter of the regulators in our survey said that they update their registers only once a year. This means that practitioners who are struck off their registers may still appear on it for the rest of the year. And even if they are struck off a list immediately, there is usually nothing to stop them signing up with another regulatory body.



### Acupuncture pains

Dorothy Chadburn visited an NHS pain clinic for trouble she was having with her elbow. Her consultant suggested that acupuncture might help. After the first session Dorothy immediately suffered from intense pains in her hand, which were still there six months later. The doctor who carried out the acupuncture was a member of the BMAS (British Medical Acupuncture Society), so she wrote to it to complain. The BMAS said that, although it could liaise between patients and its members, if problems couldn't be resolved informally, then it

could do no more. Because Dorothy's consultant wouldn't take part in an informal conciliation process, the only option she was left with was to go to a solicitor. However, since our involvement in the case, the BMAS has offered to review its handling of Dorothy's complaint, but says that it cannot force the consultant to respond.

### Complimentary about care

Tony Newman has used several complementary therapies over the past 15 years for a variety of conditions, some of which had not responded to conventional treatment. He had a book about complementary therapies that listed a number of regulatory bodies. When he was considering getting treatment with a local acupuncturist, he called the British Acupuncture Council (BAC) to check the therapist was on its register and what sort of training the therapists had.

Tony has also contacted other regulatory bodies to help find aromatherapists and chiropractors in the past. When looking for a recommendation, he tends to call those regulatory bodies which require their member therapists to take ongoing training to ensure they are up to date with current practice. Tony feels he has almost always received a good professional service whenever he has consulted a complementary therapist.

The British Complementary Medicine Association (BCMA), has 40 member organisations from a wide range of therapies. Member therapists are included on a single register, and all should comply with the BCMA's code of conduct and disciplinary procedure. If a member organisation removes a therapist from its register and notifies the BCMA, it can then prevent them joining other BCMA-member organisations. Similarly, the Institute for Complementary Medicine (ICM) also has a central register of member therapists – all of whom have agreed to accept its Code of Ethics and Practice. However, not all bodies are members of the BCMA or ICM, so therapists struck off their lists could still sign up with non-member organisations.

### FINDING A THERAPIST

With so many different bodies regulating complementary therapists, it can be difficult to know who to call first to find a therapist. As a starting point, you could try the following organisations: If you want an acupuncturist, call the British Acupuncture Council (it acts as an umbrella organisation for all the regulators in its field); for a herbalist, contact the National Institute of Medical Herbalists (which has a central register of herbalists). If you want a chiropractor or an osteopath, call The General Chiropractic Council or The General Osteopathic Council (which will soon be responsible for all chiropractors and osteopaths). There are several regulatory bodies for aromatherapy, homeopathy, hypnotherapy, massage, reflexology and other complementary therapies. You can start by contacting either the BCMA or the ICM as both have a single register of practitioners for a wide range of therapies.

We've listed the phone numbers of these organisations in *Contacts*, p59. For a full list of all the regulatory bodies we surveyed, see our web site at [www.which.net/which](http://www.which.net/which) or contact our members' helpline (see p2 for details) and quote code WCTX99. To help ensure you get a good therapist, follow our guidelines in 'What you can do', opposite.