

Women's experiences of complementary and alternative therapies for menopausal symptoms

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Background

- Part of an ESRC-funded project into innovative health technologies at women's midlife (aged between 45 and 65).
- Qualitative interviews were carried out with 98 women from various backgrounds in the North of England and Warwickshire.
- Project was in collaboration with the University of Teeside.
- Throughout the interviews, the use of complementary and alternative medicines recurred.

Existing Research

- A review of the literature relating to CAMs at midlife and more generally showed:
 - A wealth of medical research into the efficacy of various CAMs.
 - Lots of quantitative (statistical) data relating to the use of CAMs.
 - A noticeable absence of qualitative data relating to CAMs use more generally and for women at mid life.

My Role: Undertaking a review of the existing literature on CAMs. Secondary analysis of the data extracts relating to CAMs to identify recurring themes and code them accordingly.

Theme 1: Definitions of CAMs

- The definition of complementary medicines varied woman to woman.
- Vitamins and supplements, in particular, meant very different things to various women. While some saw them as alternative, others thought of them as conventional.
- Products defined as 'natural' were classed as alternative by many women.
- So were therapies that involved visits to a practitioner (such as homeopathy) or physical contact (such as acupuncture).

Theme 2: Perceptions of CAMs

- Many women claimed that they would be willing to combine CAMs with conventional medicine as CAMs were thought to have limited side effects.
- However, some women were aware that CAMs can have negative side effects.
- This theme also highlighted the opposing positivity and skepticism that women felt about CAMs.
- The high price of CAMs as a deterrent of their use was also presented within this theme.

Theme 3: Relationship between body and CAMs

- Negativity towards conventional medicine was manifested in terms of mistrust and dissatisfaction.
- Many women had a desire to control their own health at midlife and to avoid synthetic medical products.
- The desire for natural products can be understood as an extension of the belief that CAMs carry limited side effects.
- The way in which CAMs were used showed that some used CAMs as a cure, while others used them prophylactically.

Theme 4: CAMs as technology

- Central theme given the wider research subject.
- For some women, whether CAMs were a technology or not had never, understandably, been given prior thought.
- The women that thought CAMs were not technology highlighted a dichotomy of nature and science.
- These women also believed that CAMs were derived from ancient wisdom and had not changed for thousand of years.
- On the other hand, women thought they were a technology because of their ability to help relieve symptoms.

Theme 5: Health professionals and midlife

- Some women felt that doctors were interested in CAMs.
- Many of these women also said that doctors had given them enough information on CAMs.
- Other women believed doctors had no interest in CAMS and had not discussed them with their GP.
- Some of the women said that they did not feel they had received enough information in general to make decisions regarding their health at midlife. However, many of these women attributed that to the fact that they hadn't asked!

Theme 6: Acquiring and sharing information

- Most women's initial source of information about CAMs was their lay friends and family members.
- Others cited the media as being a source of information, in particular, women's magazines.
- For a handful of the women, conventional health professionals were their information sources.
- Rather surprisingly, none of the women said that they had used the Internet as source of information.
- Women were willing to pass on their experiences of CAMs.

My Experiences: The URSS scheme has proven invaluable, allowing me to be involved in professional research and developing vital skills in such a milieu. In the short term, I have developed the necessary literature searching and data analysis skills to confidently approach my final year dissertation. In the longer term, it has given me skills which are transferable to the labour market such as working alone whilst in regular contact with a supervisor, IT skills and improved communication. Overall the scheme has given me a taste of professional research and made me far more confident in my own research and analytical abilities.