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Use of unconventional medicine in Italy: a nation-wide survey

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Abstract Objective: To investigate the prevalence of use of unconventional therapies in Italy, the main health problems associated with and the motivations for use of these therapies.

Methods: Questions about the use of unconventional therapies were inserted in a nation-wide survey conducted by face-to-face interviews with all members of sampled families by the National Institute of Statistics during four quarters of the years 1999–2000. Data presented here are based on the results of the first two quarters of the survey (September and December 1999) during which a representative sample of 30,000 Italian families (70,898 individuals) was interviewed.

Results: Almost 9 million people (15.6% of the Italian population) used at least one unconventional therapy during the period 1997–1999. Homeopathy was the most frequently used (8.2% of the population), followed by manual treatments (7%), herbal medicine (4.8%) and acupuncture (2.9%). Homeopathy was also quite commonly used by children (7.7% of Italian children). The main reason for use was concern about potential toxicity of “conventional medicine”. The health problem most frequently treated with all kinds of unconventional therapies was pain.

Conclusions: Use of unconventional therapies has almost doubled since 1991. However, with 15.6% of the Italian population (9 million people) using at least one therapy, Italy ranks among the “light” users compared with other European countries. Homeopathy is the most frequently used therapy. The typical user is, as in other western countries, a highly educated woman aged 35–44 years

and resident in the richest part of the country (north-eastern Italy).

Keywords Unconventional medicine · Prevalence of use · Survey

Introduction

In the last decades, various types of treatments, remedies and spiritual/religious philosophies, often defined as unconventional, alternative, complementary, integrative, traditional, unorthodox, holistic, gentle or natural medicine, have been adopted in the western world as a cure for many health problems and illnesses. The main element common to these heterogeneous and sometimes conflicting approaches is the fact that they have roots and inspirations different from the modern scientific method, considered as a paradigm of reference in the western countries [1]. In order to evaluate this complex phenomenon, a National Research Project on “Unconventional Therapies” was funded in 1999 by the Italian Ministry of Health and co-ordinated by the National Institute of Health. The ultimate goal of this project is to provide a scientific basis for the definition of a national public health strategy in the field of unconventional therapies. In this paper we will focus on the results of a nation-wide survey whose specific objectives were to estimate the magnitude of use and understand the characteristics of the users.

Methods

The study was planned by the National Institute of Health, in collaboration with the National Institute of Statistics. The National Institute of Statistics periodically conducts a multipurpose survey on “Health conditions and health service utilisation” on a sample of Italian families representative of the population. In the two previous surveys (1991 and 1994) one question regarding the use of unconventional medicine (use of at least one therapy chosen among homeopathy, acupuncture and herbal medicine in the 3 years preceding the interview) had been included in the questionnaire [2]. In the last survey (1999–2000) an entire section was dedicated to

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unconventional medicine, and manipulative therapy and “any other unspecified unconventional therapy” were added as types of unconventional therapies.

The total sample consisted of 60,000 families (approximately 180,000 subjects) which were interviewed during four periods of 3 months (September and December 1999, March and June 2000), 3 weeks each trimester. The survey was conducted by face-to-face interviews with all family members in a sampled family. For children less than 14 years old, the mother was preferably interviewed. If a family member was absent a proxy was interviewed. The families were selected in a representative way for the whole Italian population. Results are presented, unless otherwise specified, as percentages of individuals in the total population. The Italian population to be considered as a denominator for all global proportions is 57,717,200 people.

As soon as the data collected in the first two periods, related to a representative sample of 30,000 families (70,898 subjects) interviewed on September and December 1999, were available, we decided to present the main findings. These data, although partial, yield an accurate estimate of the prevalence of use of unconventional therapies; in fact, the relative error of the estimated proportions is always lower than 5%, corresponding to very low absolute standard errors, even for phenomena with low prevalence (around 1%).

Results

An increasing phenomenon

Almost 9 million people (15.6% of the Italian population) used at least one unconventional therapy in the period 1997–1999. Comparing the results from the present study with the surveys conducted by the National Institute of Statistics in 1991 and 1994 (in which manipulative treatments or “any other unconventional medicine” were not included in the questionnaire), people who have used acupuncture, homeopathy or herbal medicine at least once in the 3 years preceding the interview have almost doubled: from 7% of the population in 1991, to 8.3% in 1994, up to 12% in 1999. Among different types of alternative medicine, the most frequently used was homeopathy, followed by manipulative treatments (osteopathy, chiropractic), herbal medicine and acupuncture (Fig. 1).

Who are the users?

In Italy, as in other European countries, women in the age group 35–44 years were the most frequent users of

these therapies (25.4%), with a female:male ratio of 1.4 [3]. Gender differences were particularly strong for homeopathy (female 10.2%, male 6.1%) and herbal medicine (female 5.9%, male 3.7%). Use of unconventional medicine in people 25 years or older increased according to education: 24.1% of people with a university degree used unconventional medicine versus 11.2% of people with only primary education.

Utilisation of unconventional therapies showed a marked geographical trend: in the north-east of the country almost one Italian of four had used at least one type of unconventional therapy during the previous 3 years, in the centre one of six, in the south one of 15. This could reflect regional economical differences (the north being richer than the south, with an average per capita income twice as great in the north than in the south). In Italy the National Health Service (NHS) provides health care and drugs to all citizens free of charge. Unconventional therapies are not covered by the NHS and are, therefore, paid directly by the users.

Use of unconventional therapies was quite high in children: 9.2% of children younger than 14 years of age had used at least one type of unconventional therapy, mostly represented by homeopathy (84% of users). Homeopathic treatment of children was strongly linked to parent behaviour: in children who had received homeopathic treatment, at least one parent (72%) or both parents (30.4%) had also used homeopathic remedies.

What people think about unconventional medicine and its usefulness

All interviewed persons were asked if they thought that unconventional therapies were useful. Overall, 39.8% gave a positive judgement about at least one type of unconventional therapy. However, 24.1% defined all the types of therapy as not useful, and 36.1% would not express any judgement.

The reasons for using unconventional therapies are reported in Fig. 2. The most common reason given was concern about side effects related to the use of standard pharmacological therapies (71%), while the relationship between patient and doctor, often considered as the main cause of use of unconventional therapies, was cited less frequently (13%) [4].

Fig. 1. Percentage of people using unconventional medicine
Source: National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT), Multi-purpose National Survey on “Health conditions and Health Services utilisation”, 1999–2000

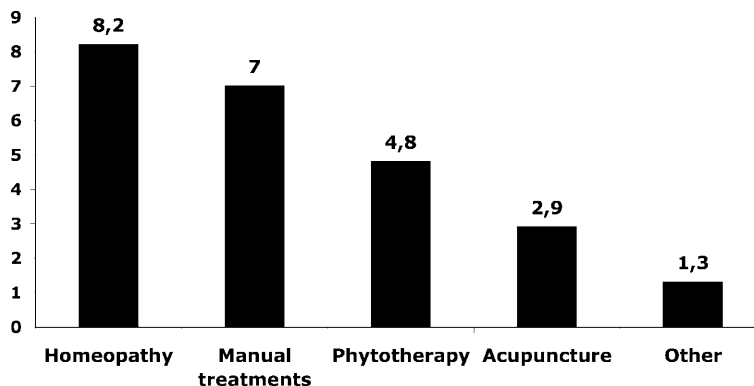


Fig. 2. Reasons for use of unconventional medicine Source: National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT), Multi-purpose National Survey on "Health conditions and Health Service utilisation", 1999–2000

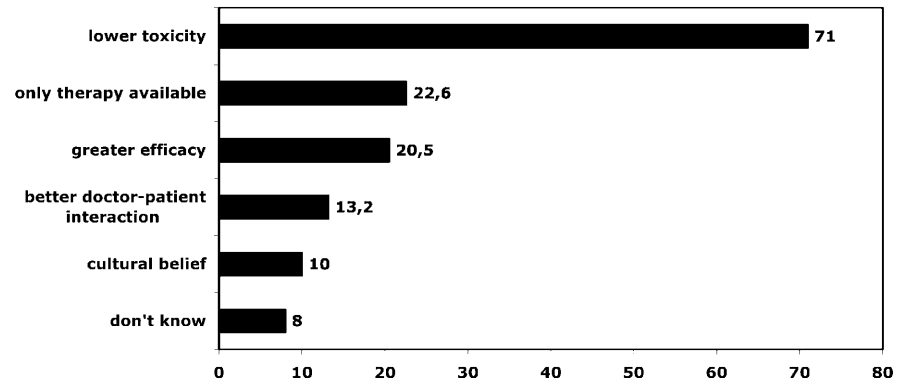


Table 1. Reported medical reasons for unconventional therapy use, shown as percentages. Source: National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT), Multi-purpose National Survey on "Health conditions and Health Services utilization", 1999–2000

Reasons	Acupuncture	Homeopathy	Herbal remedies	Manual treatments	Other unconventional therapy
Acute diseases	18.2	24.1	14.1	14.0	17.5
Pain	59.3	30.0	28.7	63.8	38.3
Psychological disorders	2.5	5.5	4.2	1.0	3.1
Quality of life	9.6	28.6	44.1	12.8	30.5
Chronic diseases	10.4	11.8	8.9	8.4	10.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

An unconventional treatment was often used following a physician's advice (38% of users) or other people's advice (30.9%); 27.2% declared to have made the choice by themselves, whereas mass media information had only a minor influence (4.6%, more than one answer could be given). The proportion of subjects making their own decision regarding the use of unconventional medicine increased with increasing educational level (33.3% of users with a university degree vs. 18.5% of users with lower education).

The general practitioner was informed by the patient about the use of unconventional therapies in 59.6% of cases. This result suggests a flexible attitude towards unconventional therapies in at least a part of the medical profession.

Subjects who used acupuncture and manipulative treatments did it principally to treat pain (respectively 59.3% and 63.8%). Herbal medicine was chosen in 44.1% of cases to improve quality of life, which represented a strong motivation for all kinds of unconventional therapies. Homeopathy was not associated with any specific health condition (Table 1).

Utilisation of unconventional medicine and satisfaction with use

Among the users of unconventional therapies, 65.7% had used only one type of therapy: homeopathy (27.3%), manipulative treatments (20.5%), herbal medicine (10.5%), acupuncture (5.8%), other unconventional therapy (1.6%); while 3% of users had used all types of unconventional medicine. A high level of satisfaction was reported by users of unconventional medicine. The greatest satisfaction was shown by

patients using manipulative treatments (77.6%) and users of herbal medicine (74.6%). Overall, 70% of users affirmed to have had some benefits.

Conclusions

In the period 1997–1999, about 9 million people in Italy (15.6% of the population) used at least one unconventional therapy, a lower proportion than that observed in other European countries where the estimates range from 20% of the population in a year in UK to approximately 50% in France and Germany [5, 6, 7]. To obtain more comparable estimates, a cross-national survey should be performed according to a common methodology. However, the use of unconventional medicine in Italy is an increasing phenomenon (the percentage of users doubled from 1991 to 1999). The relative increase was highest for homeopathy (from 2.5% of Italians in 1991 to 8.2% in 1999). Use of homeopathy was also fairly common in children (7.7% of Italians from 0 years to 14 years of age).

As in other western countries, use of unconventional medicine was most prevalent in highly educated women, aged 35–44 years. Unconventional therapies were mostly used in Italy to treat pain. It would be very useful to have further details on the diseases treated with unconventional therapies, but the complexity of the interview (the questionnaire included many different sections and questions) did not allow for more precise information on this topic. An expected lower toxicity of unconventional medicine was the most frequent reason for use. However, cultural or philosophical beliefs did not appear to be as important for the choice [4].

In Italy users of unconventional medicine are increasing. This supports the need to provide users with evidence-based knowledge on benefits and risks of these practices comparable with those of “conventional treatments”. The evaluation process should not rely only on a single study and should be carefully carried out to determine if equipoise was guaranteed in the design and conduction of trials. As for “conventional medicine”, only the accumulation of rigorous evidence and balance between facts and theories can provide sound, though tentative, conclusions [8, 9].

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