

[A research roadmap for complementary and alternative medicine - what we need to know by 2020].

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Abstract

BACKGROUND: The CAMbrella coordination action was funded within the Framework Programme 7. Its aim is to provide a research roadmap for clinical and epidemiological research for complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) that is appropriate for the health needs of European citizens and acceptable to their national research institutes and healthcare providers in both public and private sectors. One major issue in the European research agenda is the demographic change and its impact on health care. Our vision for 2020 is that there is an evidence base that enables European citizens to make informed decisions about CAM, both positive and negative. This roadmap proposes a strategic research agenda for the field of CAM designed to address future European health care challenges. This roadmap is based on the results of CAMbrella's several work packages, literature reviews and expert discussions including a consensus meeting.

METHODS: We first conducted a systematic literature review on key issues in clinical and epidemiological research in CAM to identify the general concepts, methods and the strengths and weaknesses of current CAM research. These findings were discussed in a workshop (Castellaro, Italy, September 7–9th 2011) with international CAM experts and strategic and methodological recommendations were defined in order to improve the rigor and relevance of CAM research. These recommendations provide the basis for the research roadmap, which was subsequently discussed in a consensus conference (Järna, Sweden, May 9–11th 2012) with all CAMbrella members and the CAMbrella advisory board. The roadmap was revised after this discussion in CAMbrella Work Package (WP) 7 and finally approved by CAMbrella's scientific steering committee on September 26th 2012.

RESULTS: Our main findings show that CAM is very heterogenous in terms of definitions and legal regulations between the European countries. In addition, citizens' needs and attitudes towards CAM as well as the use and provision of CAM differ significantly between countries. In terms of research methodology, there was consensus that CAM researchers should make use of all the commonly accepted scientific research methods and employ those with utmost diligence combined in a mixed methods framework.

CONCLUSIONS: We propose 6 core areas of research that should be investigated to achieve a robust knowledge base and to allow stakeholders to make informed decisions. These are:

Research into the prevalence of CAM in Europe: Reviews show that we do not know enough about the circumstances in which CAM is used by Europeans. To enable a common European strategic approach, a clear picture of current use is of the utmost importance. Research into differences regarding citizens' attitudes and needs towards CAM: Citizens are the driver for CAM utilization. Their needs and views on CAM are a key priority, and their interests must be investigated and addressed in future CAM research. Research into safety of CAM: Safety is a key issue for European citizens. CAM is considered safe, but reliable data is scarce although urgently needed in order to assess the risk and cost-benefit ratio of CAM. Research into the comparative effectiveness of CAM: Everybody needs to know in what situation CAM is a reasonable choice. Therefore, we recommend a clear emphasis on concurrent evaluation of the overall effectiveness of CAM as an additional or alternative treatment strategy in real-world settings. Research into effects of context and meaning: The impact of effects of context and meaning on the outcome of CAM treatments must be investigated; it is likely that they are significant. Research into different models of CAM health care integration: There are different models of CAM being integrated into conventional medicine throughout Europe, each with their respective strengths and limitations. These models should be described and concurrently evaluated; innovative models of CAM provision in health care systems should be one focus for CAM research. We also propose a methodological framework for CAM research. We consider that a framework of mixed methodological approaches is likely to yield the most useful information. In this model, all available research strategies including comparative effectiveness research utilising quantitative and qualitative methods should be considered to enable us to secure the greatest density of knowledge possible. Stakeholders, such as citizens, patients and providers, should be involved in every stage of developing the specific and relevant research questions, study design and the assurance of real-world relevance for the research.

Furthermore, structural and sufficient financial support for research into CAM is needed to strengthen CAM research capacity if we wish to understand why it remains so popular within the EU. In order to consider employing CAM as part of the solution to the health care, health creation and self-care challenges we face by 2020, it is vital to obtain a robust picture of CAM use and reliable information about its cost, safety and effectiveness in real-world settings. We need to consider the availability, accessibility and affordability of CAM. We need to engage in research excellence and utilise comparative effectiveness approaches and mixed methods to obtain this data. Our recommendations are both strategic and methodological. They are presented for the consideration of researchers and funders while being designed to answer the important and implicit questions posed by EU citizens currently using CAM in apparently increasing numbers. We propose that the EU actively supports an EU-wide strategic approach that facilitates the development of CAM research. This could be achieved in the first instance through funding a European CAM coordinating research office dedicated to foster systematic communication between EU governments, public, charitable and industry funders as well as researchers, citizens and other stakeholders. The aim of this office would be to coordinate research strategy developments and research funding opportunities, as well as to document and

disseminate international research activities in this field. With the aim to develop sustainability as second step, a European Centre for CAM should be established that takes over the monitoring and further development of a coordinated research strategy for CAM, as well as it should have funds that can be awarded to foster high quality and robust independent research with a focus on citizens health needs and pan-European collaboration. We wish to establish a solid funding for CAM research to adequately inform health care and health creation decision-making throughout the EU. This centre would ensure that our vision of a common, strategic and scientifically rigorous approach to CAM research becomes our legacy and Europe's reality. We are confident that our recommendations will serve these essential goals for EU citizens.

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