

The Use of Complementary Therapies in the Management and Treatment of Infertility

Acknowledgements

We thank all the participants of this survey for their contribution and the consultants who are the brains behind the analysis.

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Executive Summary

- 1. Complementary therapies can play an important role in the management and treatment of infertility.**
- 2. Nutrition and herbal medicine play a significant role in treating specific health issues.**
- 3. Massage therapy is the most commonly used complementary therapy.**
- 4. Increasing numbers of people are open to complementary therapies.**
- 5. More research and evidence based studies are needed to educate the public about the role of complementary therapy in infertility.**
- 6. Complementary therapies and allopathic medicine should coexist in harmony.**

Assignment – Original Research

Aim

The aim of this survey is to assess the participants' willingness to use complementary therapies in the management of treating infertility, and if they choose to do so, the forms of complementary therapies they would use.

Method

A survey was created that asked participants about the following:

- Age, gender and level of education
 - To determine whether these variables affect the results of the survey.
- Past experience in complementary therapies
 - To establish awareness and past experience, and see whether these factors may influence the participants' decision on using complementary therapies for infertility.
 - To find out what are the most commonly used complementary therapies in general.
- Awareness of the causes of infertility
 - To assess the participants' familiarity with the topic of infertility and to determine their knowledge of its causes.
- Opinion on the efficacy of complementary therapies for managing infertility
 - To ascertain the surveyed opinion on the efficacy of complementary therapies for managing infertility
- Willingness to use complementary therapies for treating infertility.
 - To find out if the participants are personally willing to use complementary therapies for treating infertility, and if so, their reasons for choosing to do so, and the types of complementary therapies they will use. Conversely, if not, to determine their reasons for choosing not to do so.

Variables

The age range of this survey is 15 – 70 years of age, although due to the nature of the topic, participants of child-bearing age are our prime focus as we think the results would be more representative of our survey. The majority of participants fall into the 25 – 44 age group; this is the age range most affected by fertility issues. However for completeness, we also include participants from other age groups to obtain their views on infertility.

Through the course of our analysis, we do not make the distinction between male and female responses as our view is that decisions on infertility within a family unit will ultimately be based on that of a couple's, which will hence include both male and female input.

Procedure

Permission is sought from the subjects prior to participation in the survey. The following section is a precursor to the survey.

I agree to participate in the following survey. The information provided is accurate and reflects my opinions.

I expect confidentiality regarding this information and request that it is not provided to any other person or cause without my written permission. Although I have signed this document, the information is to be included in the study as from an anonymous source.

Signed _____ Date _____

Each subject was provided with a survey (see appendix 1) and the results are analysed following collection of the data. 70 persons participated in the survey with an average age within the 25 – 44 years bracket (range is from 15 – 70 years). 45.7% (32) of the participants are male and 54.3% (38) are female.

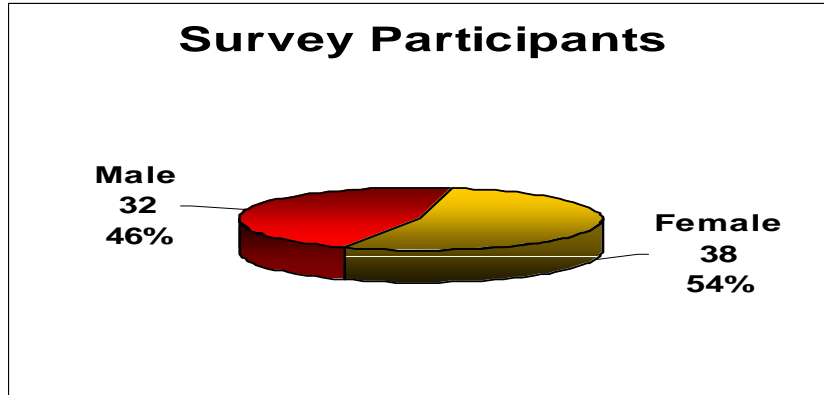
Limitations

Due to the sensitive nature of the survey topic, we avoided asking participants specific personal questions on their fertility status. The committee thinks that a larger sample size will provide more detailed data, and recommends further research to be undertaken in the future based on the findings that emerge from this survey.

Results and Discussion

1 Which gender are you?

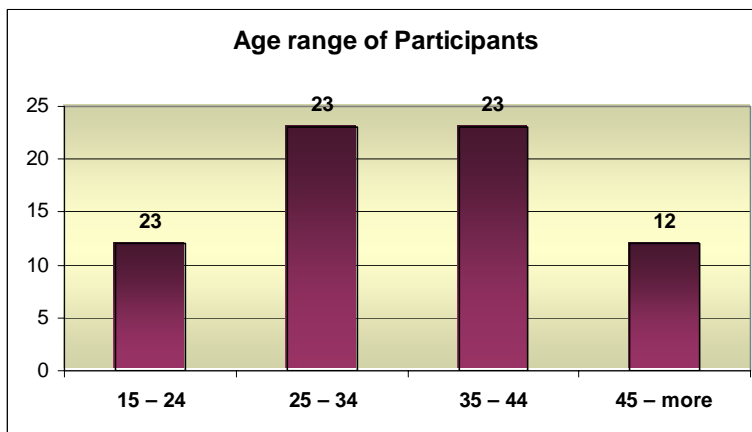
<i>Female</i>	38	54%
<i>Male</i>	32	46%
Total	70	



There were a total of 70 participants in this survey. Thirty eight were females and thirty two were males.

2 Which age range are you in?

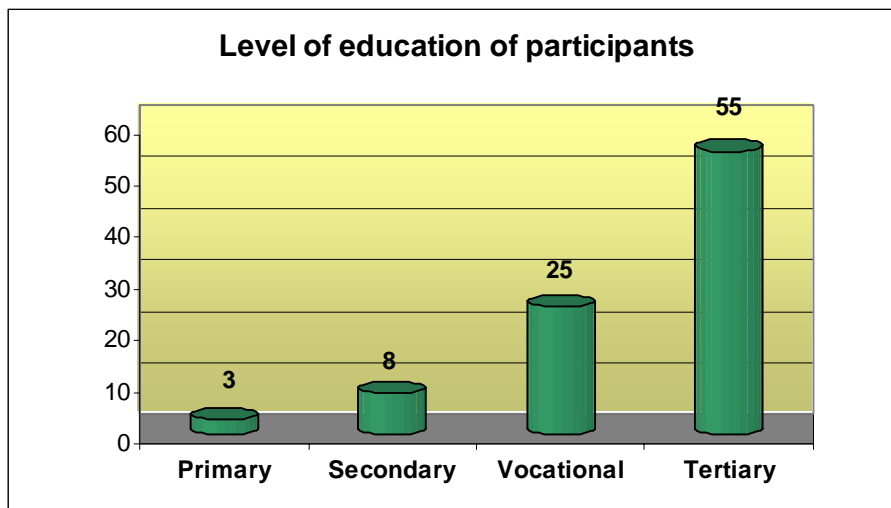
<i>15 – 24</i>	12	17%
<i>25 – 34</i>	23	33%
<i>35 – 44</i>	23	33%
<i>45 – more</i>	12	17%
Total	70	



The bulk of the people represented in the survey are from the 25 – 44 age range. This age group represents people of child-bearing age, and people who will be most affected by fertility issues.

3 Level of education you participated in.

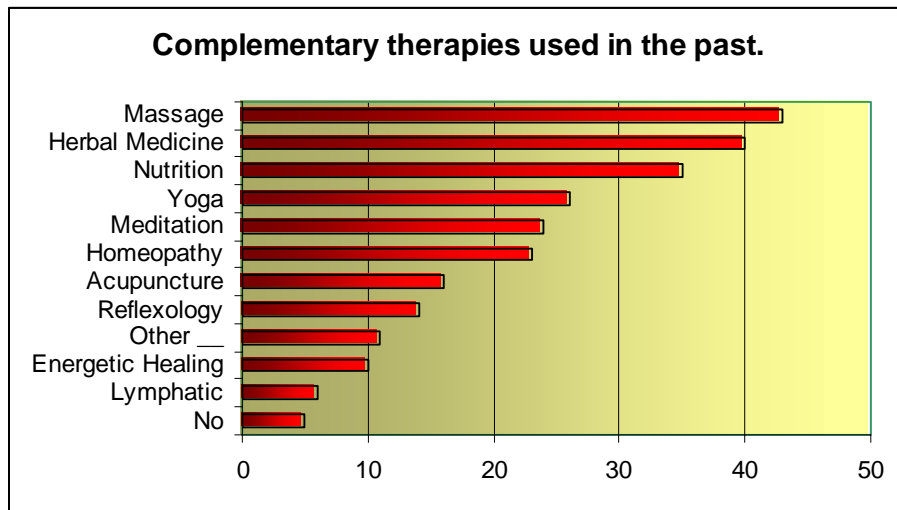
<i>Primary</i>	3	4%
<i>Secondary</i>	8	22%
<i>Vocational</i>	25	14%
<i>Tertiary</i>	55	38%
Total	91	



The education level fell in the tertiary and vocational category. A few respondents had vocational and tertiary qualifications.

4. Have you used complementary therapies in the past for any other ailments?

<i>Massage</i>	43	17%
<i>Herbal Medicine</i>	40	16%
<i>Nutrition</i>	35	14%
<i>Yoga</i>	26	10%
<i>Meditation</i>	24	9%
<i>Homeopathy</i>	23	9%
<i>Acupuncture</i>	16	6%
<i>Reflexology</i>	14	6%
<i>Others</i>	11	5%
<i>Energetic Healing</i>	10	4%
<i>Lymphatic Drainage</i>	6	2%
<i>No</i>	5	2%
Total	253	



Out of 70 participants, only 5 have never used complementary therapies previously. 92.9% of participants have previously used some form of complementary therapy. In a total of 253 responses, the most popular forms of therapies are massage, herbal medicine and nutrition.

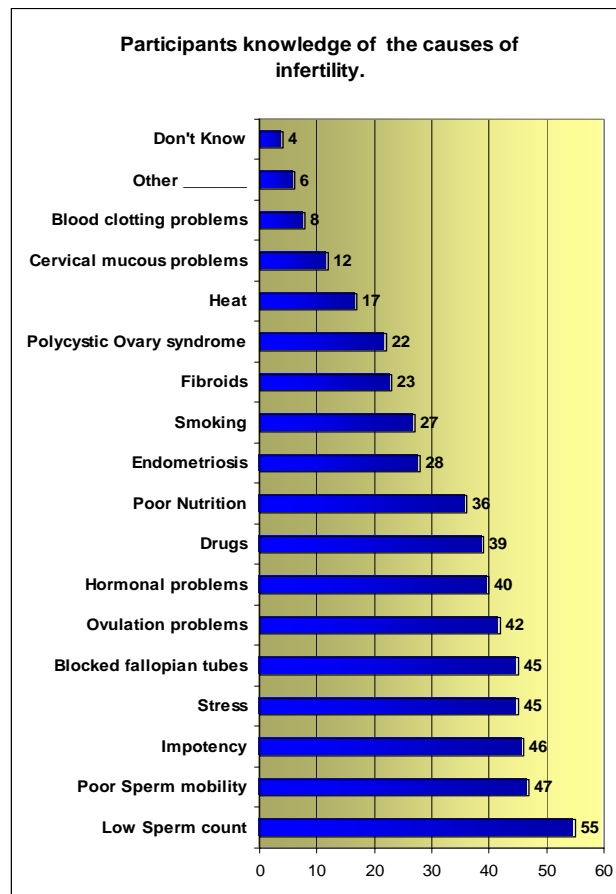
Together with the previous information on education levels, the majority of which fell into the tertiary and vocational bracket, this suggests that the level of awareness and usage of complementary therapies is high among those who have received a higher level of education. This concurs with the findings of a study conducted by The Medical Journal of Australia on the characteristics of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) users and non-users among Australian women. They too found that CAM users in Australia tend to have a higher level of education.¹ (MJA 2003)

In addition, the findings indicate that people are generally more open to the idea of complementary therapies, and that they are looking at options apart from those of orthodox medicine in treating disease and maintenance of their health. The high level of usage perhaps also shows that, in addition to disease management, there is now a growing trend towards disease prevention.

On top of the list provided, other forms of complementary therapies mentioned include Reiki, crystal-healing, breathwork, kinesiology, shiatsu, qigong, osteopathy, chakra balancing, Ayurvedic medicine and Pilates.

5 Do you know/suspect what can cause infertility? Please tick from the list below (multiple answers are acceptable).

<i>Low Sperm count</i>	55	10%
<i>Poor Sperm mobility</i>	47	9%
<i>Impotency</i>	46	8%
<i>Stress</i>	45	8%
<i>Blocked fallopian tubes</i>	45	8%
<i>Ovulation problems</i>	42	8%
<i>Hormonal problems</i>	40	7%
<i>Drugs</i>	39	7%
<i>Poor Nutrition</i>	36	7%
<i>Endometriosis</i>	28	3%
<i>Smoking</i>	27	5%
<i>Fibroids</i>	23	4%
<i>Polycystic Ovary syndrome</i>	22	4%
<i>Heat</i>	17	3%
<i>Cervical mucous problems</i>	12	2%
<i>Blood clotting problems</i>	8	1%
<i>Other _____</i>	6	1%
<i>Don't Know</i>	4	1%
Total	542	

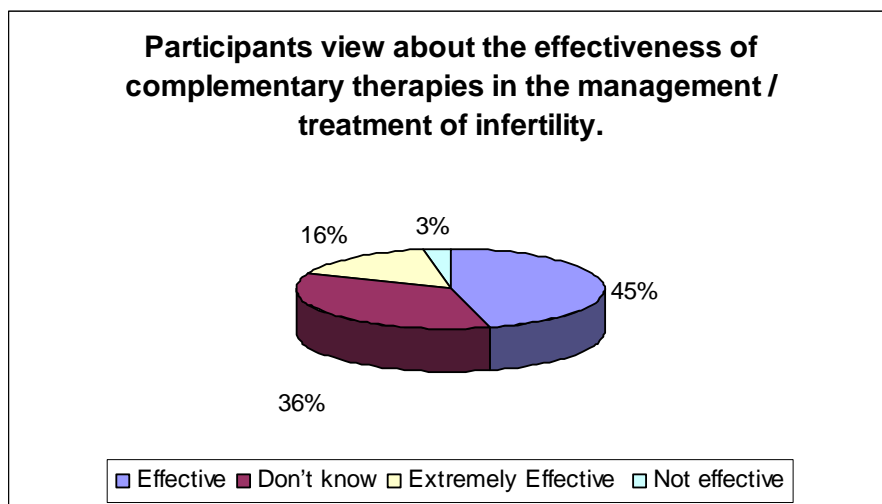


From the total survey population, only 4 participants do not have any idea what causes infertility. The top five causes of infertility that the participants are aware of are (in descending order) low sperm count, poor sperm mobility, impotency, stress and blocked fallopian tubes.

The results of this question indicates that the general survey population possess some degree of knowledge about the causes of infertility. However as a group, we notice that in answering this question, the female respondents are more aware of the causes of infertility than their male counterparts. They are generally better informed about complications arising from the female reproductive system than the male participants. They hence chose causes which involves both male and female reproductive systems, whereas the male participants tend to select causes that stem from the male reproductive system.

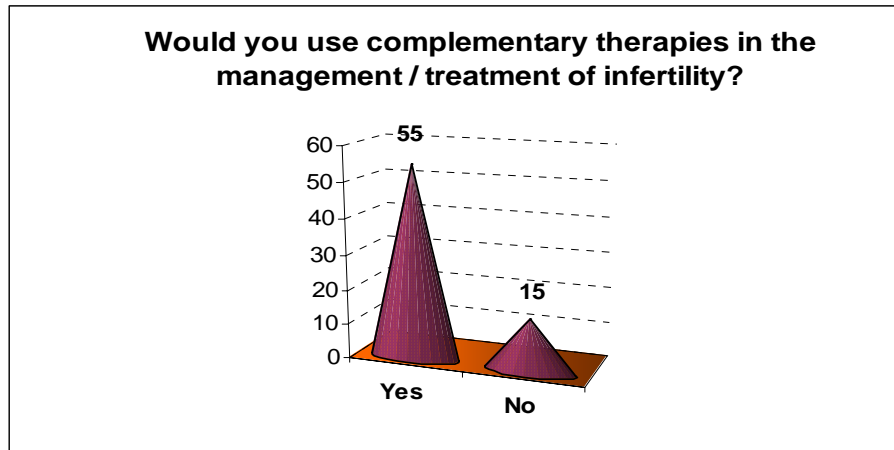
The group is pleasantly surprised to notice that more than half of the surveyed population knew that lifestyle factors like nutrition, stress and drugs contribute to infertility. From the results, it is apparent that these factors, together with smoking affected both the male and female populations.

6	How effective do you think complementary therapies would be in the management / treatment of infertility?		
	<i>Effective</i>	32	46%
	<i>Don't know</i>	25	36%
	<i>Extremely Effective</i>	11	16%
	<i>Not effective</i>	2	3%
	Total	70	



The results show that in total, 43 out of 70 or 62% of the participants are confident that complementary therapies are effective in treating infertility. Twenty-five participants are undecided, and only two participants think that complementary therapies will not be effective. The high percentage of approving participants indicates that at present, there is a greater awareness and reception of complementary therapies. This applies not only to general ailments, but for more specific and serious conditions like infertility management as well.

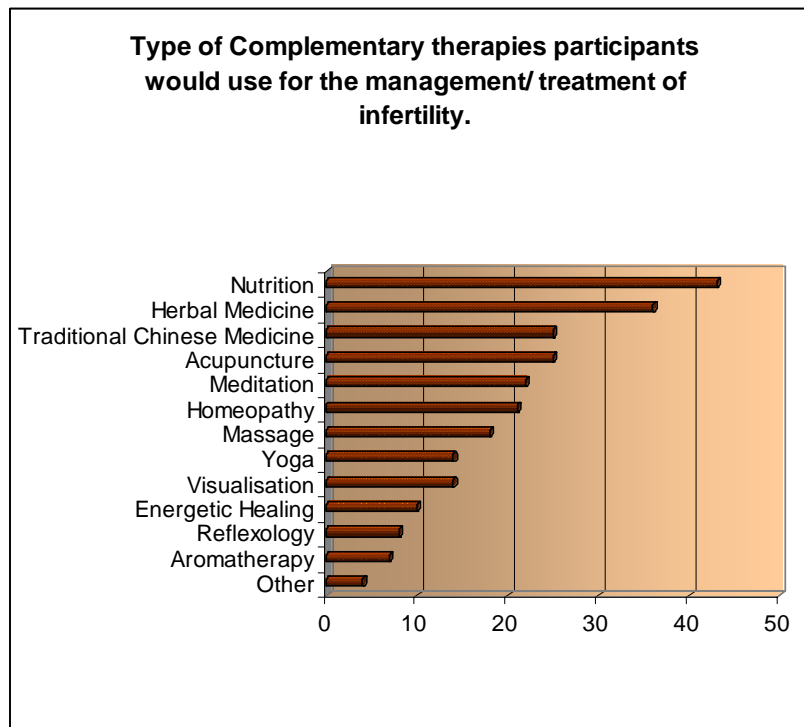
7	Would you use complementary therapies in the management / treatment of infertility?		
	<i>Yes</i>	55	79%
	<i>No</i>	15	21%
	Total	70	



From the surveyed population, 79% (55) will personally use complementary therapies in the treatment of infertility. 21% (15) will not. While this result is still positive, when compared with question 4, there are an additional 10 participants who have previously used complementary therapies for other reasons who will not use it for treating infertility. One hypothesis for this discrepancy is that while these 10 participants may view complementary therapies as being effective for treating general health conditions, they may think it is less useful in the case of infertility. They may view infertility as a graver condition, which thus requires mainstream orthodox treatment methods. As with most other conditions, people tend to use orthodox medicine first, and try natural therapies later as a last resort. This may also apply to infertility.

8 What kind of complementary therapies would you use for the management / treatment of infertility? (Multiple answers are acceptable).

<i>Nutrition</i>	43	17%
<i>Herbal Medicine</i>	36	15%
<i>Traditional Chinese Medicine</i>	25	10%
<i>Acupuncture</i>	25	10%
<i>Meditation</i>	22	9%
<i>Homeopathy</i>	21	9%
<i>Massage</i>	18	7%
<i>Yoga</i>	14	6%
<i>Visualisation</i>	14	6%
<i>Energetic Healing</i>	10	4%
<i>Reflexology</i>	8	3%
<i>Aromatherapy</i>	7	3%
<i>Other _____</i>	4	2%
Total	247	



In a total of 247 responses, the four most popular therapies for the management/treatment of infertility are (in order of priority) nutrition, herbal medicine, with both acupuncture and traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) coming in third. Aromatherapy is the least popular choice.

Since the majority of the surveyed population are not of Chinese descent, the group was surprised to see that acupuncture and TCM are popular choices of treatment. This indicates that in general, people are starting to break out of their comfort zones to explore medical practices from other cultural backgrounds. They are more willing to explore different forms of therapies in order to gain the expertise they seek. In addition, the results show that the presence of Asians in Sydney has exerted a significant influence in areas such as healthcare, and more specifically, infertility management and treatment.

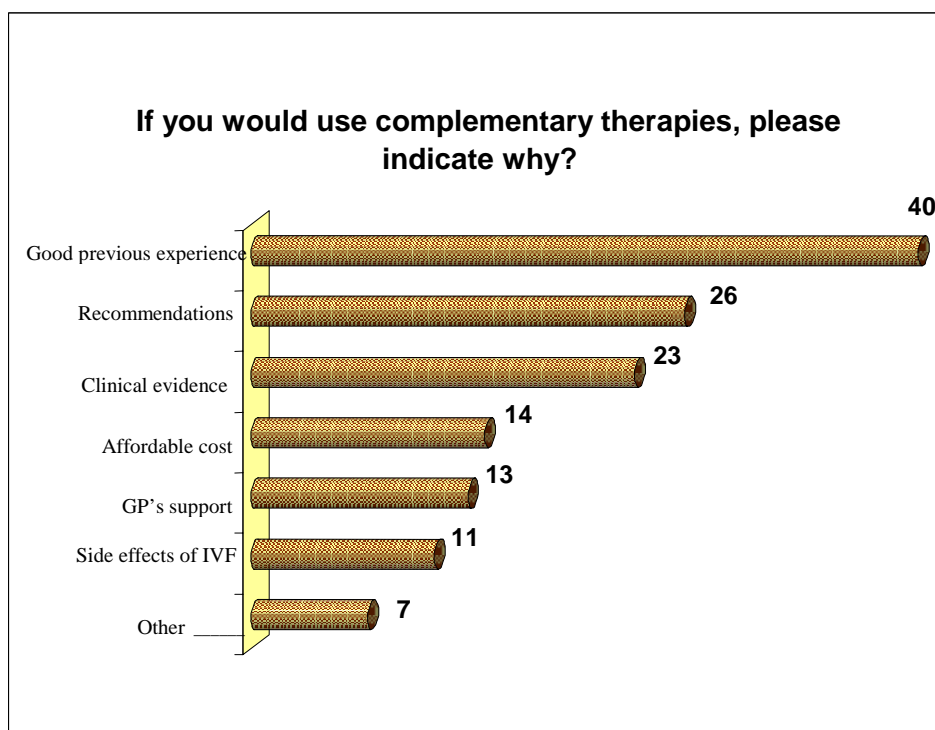
In the earlier question enquiring about previous usage of complementary therapies, both nutrition and herbal medicine were top choices. Thus it is not surprising that they are leading choices for infertility treatment as well. The popularity of these modalities may be because they are more recognised, more readily available and more actively promoted by the media. There is also more research and clinical evidence to support their effectiveness.

What is unexpected is that while previously massage was rated as the most prevalent form of complementary treatment used, the participants see it as having low priority when it comes to infertility management and treatment. From this we conclude that people view massage as being effective for general conditions like relieving stress, tension and perhaps musculoskeletal disorders, but not for treating reproductive problems. Nutrition is considered to be a more effective form of therapy for treating infertility.

Aromatherapy is the least popular choice. Although there are some essential oils that are extremely valuable for those who are trying to conceive, it seems that the majority of participants are quite unaware of its benefits. Only seven persons will use it for managing and treating infertility.

9. If you would use complementary therapies please indicate why from the list below.(multiple answers are accepted)

<i>Good experience with previous complementary therapies</i>	40	30%
<i>Recommendations from friends/family/work colleagues</i>	26	19%
<i>Clinical evidence</i>	23	17%
<i>Cost of treatment is affordable</i>	14	10%
<i>Supported/recommended by GP</i>	13	10%
<i>Side effects of IVF (in-vitro fertilization)</i>	11	8%
<i>Other _____</i>	7	5%
Total	134	



From the 134 responses, the most common reasons for choosing complementary therapies in the management and treatment of infertility are good experience with previous complementary therapies, and recommendations from friends, family or colleagues. From this we can deduce that besides personal experience, word of mouth is a powerful influence on treatment options. Recommendations from friends and family are especially persuasive because hearing about a good personal experience from someone we know makes it more credible and convincing.

Clinical evidence is the third most common reason for choosing complementary therapies. Since the majority of the surveyed population are neither students nor practitioners of complementary therapies, this indicates that there are other ways in which clinical evidence is reaching the general population. For one, the media, which includes television, newspapers and magazines, has been a big player in promoting alternative and complementary lifestyles and publicising research conducted in these areas.

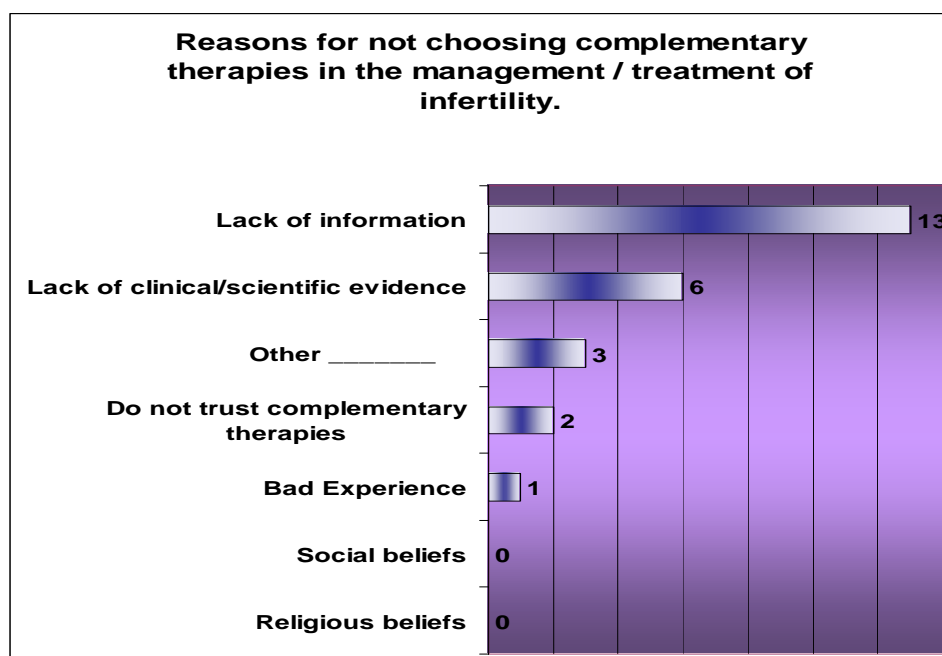
Interestingly, 13 participants say that their general practitioners (GP) recommend or support complementary therapies. Once again, this points to the overall increase in awareness and acceptance of natural therapies. This extends to orthodox practitioners who have traditionally opposed any alternative medical views.

The affordable cost of complementary therapies (as compared to mainstream options like in vitro fertilisation (IVF) programs) is rated low as a reason. There are probably two factors for this. On the one hand, we have infertile couples that turn to complementary therapies only as a last resort after orthodox methods failed to work for them. At this stage, they are probably quite desperate and thus money will be less of an issue than the effectiveness of the therapy. On the other hand, there is the group of people who have strong personal convictions and beliefs in the efficacy of complementary therapies. Thus similarly, they would use these therapies regardless of the price.

The side-effects of IVF are stated as the least important reason for choosing complementary therapies in the management and treatment of infertility. The group thinks that this low response is probably due to the fact that the general population has not faced infertility issues and is thus unaware of its detrimental side-effects.

10 If you would not choose complementary therapies in the management / treatment of infertility, please indicate why from the list below (multiple answers are acceptable).

<i>Lack of information</i>	13	52%
<i>Lack of clinical/scientific evidence</i>	6	24%
<i>Other _____</i>	3	12%
<i>Do not trust complementary therapies</i>	2	8%
<i>Bad Experience</i>	1	4%
<i>Social beliefs</i>	0	0%
<i>Religious beliefs</i>	0	0%
Total	25	



In the 70 participants surveyed, only 15 say that they will not use complementary therapies for treating infertility. From these 15 people, there were 25 responses for reasons they will not choose to do so. The majority of them feel that there is a lack of information, while others indicate a lack of scientific or clinical evidence. Both of the above reasons can be due to a lack of funding for research into complementary therapies as compared to orthodox medicine, which is aggressively promoted and advertised.

The recent PAN pharmaceuticals saga could have negatively affected people's view of complementary therapies. There may have been more than one bad experience, however only one person was willing to acknowledge it as a reason for not choosing complementary therapies for infertility treatment. Religious and social beliefs had no bearing on the issue. This may be due in part to a small sample size. For more detailed information, the group recommends a larger sample size.

Summary

On the whole, there are increasing numbers of people who are open to complementary therapies. More specifically, complementary therapies are a viable option in the treatment and management of infertility. People are aware of specific modalities that can be used in infertility. Among them, nutrition, herbal medicine, acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine are the most sought after options. Natural therapy practitioners who are interested in infertility management and treatment may thus use this as a guide to further explore these specific areas. In addition, since the major reason for not choosing to use complementary therapies in infertility is primarily due to lack of information and evidence, the group feels that more education and publicity is needed to further increase the general population's awareness of the efficacy of complementary therapies in a wide range of conditions, including infertility. This will hopefully lead to an even greater acceptance and wider usage of complementary therapies for infertility in the future.

This survey was not done with the intention to prove which form of therapy be it allopathic or complementary is better in the management and treatment of infertility. Allopathic and complementary medicine can and should coexist in harmony to facilitate and support the healing process.

ⁱ Adams J, Sibbritt DW, Easthope G, Young AF, 2003. The profile of women who consult alternative health practitioners in Australia. *Medical Journal of Australia* 179:297-300