Why med schools teach meditation

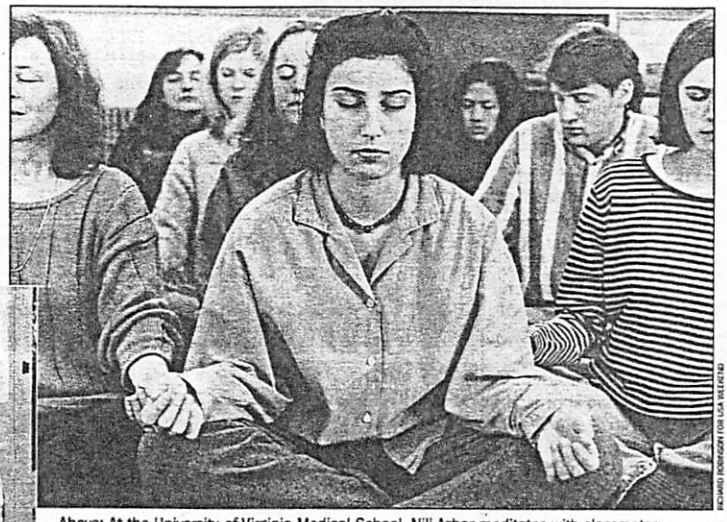
With 1 in 3 Americans turning to alternative healers, a government panel has prescribed a change in doctors' training. Now more MDs-to-be are studying cures from herbs to prayer. By ANN JAPENGA

MEDICAL STUDENT Larry Ferber was — as usual — trying to accomplish three things at once. He dropped in on an endoscopy in the operating room, read lab work on a patient, and raced, heart revving, into the student lounge at the University of Virginia Medical School in Charlottesville for a program called "Meditation and a Meal."

Ferber reclined on a mat. Soon, his heart stopped chattering beneath his scrubs. He felt relaxed and alert. And he wondered what such "alternative" methods could do for his patients. As a result, Ferber, 30, a fourth-year student, is now practicing hands-on healing and learning to read auras to avoid severing energy fields with his scalpel. His career choice — "alternative surgeon" — seems exotic, but that's changing.

PALI DELEVITT

Students learn to read auras so they won't sever patients' energy fields with their scalpels.



RICHARD ROBINSON FOR USA WEEKEND

Above: At the University of Virginia Medical School, Nili Azhar meditates with classmates. Left: Future "alternative surgeon" Larry Ferber practices his healing touch.

In 50 of the USA's 135 medical schools, anatomy and biochemistry are being supplemented with acupuncture, homeopathy, nutrition, massage and prayer. Last summer, a panel convened by the Office of Alternative Medicine at the National Institutes of Health recommended all medical and nursing students be exposed to alternative theories and techniques. Since then, a few schools, including the University of Virginia, have mandated that every doctor-to-be learn about alternative treatments.

CONSUMERS DEMAND ALTERNATIVES

Sparking this upheaval is consumer demand. One in three Americans routinely visits alternative practitioners; visits to holistic healers now outnumber visits to conventional doctors. Demand could accelerate if Congress passes the Access to Medical Treatment Act, freeing doctors to suggest non-FDA-approved remedies without fear of prosecution. This would give patients more access to alternative medicine (now often called integrative medicine) and open discussion between patients and doctors. Today, 70 percent of patients who use unconventional remedies don't tell their doctors.

"We're not saying every medical student should learn how to be an acupuncturist or a guided imagery leader," says Allen Neims, a Florida physician who was chairman of the NIH panel. "But they should learn enough about these techniques that they can communicate reasonably with their patients and other practitioners about them."

Curriculum committees may believe alternatives are not "real" medicine and are not scientifically proven. But Pali Delevitt, who teaches alternatives at the University of Virginia Medical School, is able to cite a crop of new scientific studies. More validation is due as the Office of Alternative Medicine funds studies, and two new peer-reviewed alternative medicine journals encourage research.

Which is not to say all "alternatives" will be deemed valid. Some treatments, such as acupuncture and chiropractic, are fairly well-accepted medically, but others, such as crystal therapy and iridology, are more suspect. "It does the field a disservice to lump all these together under the term 'alternative,' " Neims says. "There's a vast difference in the degree to which they've been proven."

NO UNIFORM STANDARDS

There also is a scattershot approach to teaching alternative medicine, with each school designing its own courses. "Anyone who wants to put on a course can do it," says Wallace Sampson, a professor at the Stanford University School of Medicine who queried med schools about offerings. "There's close to zero quality control."

He found everything from brown-bag lectures to eight-week seminar courses surveying the field. At the University of Arizona College of Medicine, Andrew Weil, a Harvard medical school grad and author of the best seller *Spontaneous Healing*, is directing a two-year fellowship.

At the University of Virginia, advanced students like Larry Ferber may take an elective in which they spend six hours a day, five days a week, experimenting with unconventional treatments. In the end, says instructor Delevitt, Ferber will be more than a surgeon: He'll be a healer who also knows how to wield a scalpel.

New lessons in healing

Because "alternative" might not sound like "real" medicine, some advocates use the term "integrative" to describe the blending of pharmacology and surgery with unconventional or ancient techniques like these:

Homeopathy. The use of infinitesimal doses of natural substances to stimulate the body's healing systems.

Nutritional therapy. Includes macrobiotic diets for cancer patients, as well as general attempts to increase well-being through nutrients found in foods.

Herbal remedies. The world's most common medicine, it uses plants to treat specific conditions or enhance overall health.

Acupuncture. An ancient Chinese technique in which fine, sterile needles are inserted in the skin to relieve pain and stimulate healing.

Massage therapy. Stimulates muscles, nerves and the circulatory and lymphatic systems to manage pain, reduce stress and help post-op recovery.

Mind-body. Meditation, hypnosis, biofeedback, yoga, t'ai chi, guided imagery and visualization, all used to relieve pain and manage stress.

Do you have an N.D.?

Medical schools teaching a hands-on approach (how to position acupuncture needles, for example) are taking cues from naturopathic medical schools, which emphasize nutrition and prevention. Grads of four-year accredited naturopathic programs are licensed in 12 states: Alaska, Arizona, Connecticut, Florida, Hawaii, Maine, Montana, New Hampshire, Oregon, Utah, Vermont, Washington.