

Ephedra, Etcetera

Student C

In class, my group mates and I attempted to show the spread of Asian medicines as a facet of a globalized approach to medical care. My part of the presentation concerned itself with two herbs that helped to show new aspects of the globalization of Asian medicine. Ephedra showcased the fact that Asian herbs are not always a good alternative to modern medicines. More importantly, it showed that the circles that oversee western medicine (like the FDA) have, as of late, begun to review natural compounds. This is an important step for the alternative medicine movement because it legitimizes the use of herbs as a form of treatment. The second herb I examined was clove oil. Clove oil served a few purposes for our presentation. In keeping with our theme, it provided an example of an herb with which the class is familiar, and which has medical uses they may not know of. Its widespread use in dentistry, and the fact that it predated Western medicines like Novocaine and artificial fillings, establishes the legitimacy of herbs as medicines even more. The third, and last section of my contribution concerned the motivation behind the globalization of Asian and alternative medicines. Among the reasons that I outlined were the lack of stigma, the lowered cost or risks associated with treatment, and the appeal of natural products and alternative treatments to various systems of beliefs. Most importantly, the placebo effect was introduced as a possible explanation of the efficacy of many alternative medicines. In summary, the key idea in my individual presentation was to explain the reasons and methods of the legitimization of alternative medicine and associated treatments in western medicine, partially through examples.

In doing the research for this project, I learned interesting things about the herbs I researched. Before this project, I was unaware that ephedrine came from a plant, and I was unaware that cloves had any medicinal purpose at all. It was just as surprising as learning that nutmeg has hallucinogenic properties. More interesting still was finding the article concerning the placebo effect from Scientific American. This piqued my curiosity, mostly because the placebo effect and alternative medicine are the

reason that I am interested in Course 9 (Brain and Cognitive Sciences) here at MIT. My plans for post-graduate work involve learning acupuncture at a school based in Boston, getting a grant to study alternative medicine, and establishing what exactly makes treatments like acupuncture and aromatherapy work. On a biochemical level, the mechanisms of many alternative medicines are still unknown. As a high school student, I speculated that a majority of the efficacy of acupuncture and other Asian medicines stemmed from a well-maintained placebo effect. The article from Scientific American only strengthens my suspicions, and I would have loved to have been able to carry out more investigation in this area.

In my section, I attempted to make the connection between what we had studied and the theme of globalization. The travel of Asian medicines would not have been possible in a world without “globalization”. The travel of goods, services, ideas, beliefs, and customs is the embodiment of globalization. The fact that not only the herbs, but also belief in the efficacy of these alternative treatments, have been able to cross cultural and geographic boundaries shows that our topic is pertinent. It is clear that traveling the globe requires a product, procedure, or belief to have appeal across the world. The appeal of each piece of medicine was discussed by all individuals in our group, and I attempted to cover the more general topic of Asian medicine as a whole. Chief among the reasons I gave was the ability of alternative medicine to appeal to people with different belief systems. If one looks at the evidence that supports the “placebo effect” theory of medicine, it is easy to see why alternative medicines with no biochemical benefits could be more helpful than Western medicines. For a person who mistrusts the style of Western medicine, treatment can even be detrimental. This is known as the “nocebo effect”. Since Asian medicines provide a different form of treatment for these groups, they undeniably have the appeal that they need to truly be “globalized”.

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