Surveys conducted in several European countries have shown a high demand for complementary and alternative medicine (CAM), as an increasing number of citizens seek relief for disorders they feel cannot be treated with conventional therapy. As many as half of those surveyed said they used alternative healthcare for their needs. The European Commission estimates that spending on CAM by consumers now tops EUR 100 million. There are currently more than 150,000 registered medical doctors with additional CAM certification. But when it comes to advice on CAM, it was found in countries such as Ireland, Israel, Norway, Turkey and the United Kingdom that citizens sought the opinions of their social network of friends and family, rather than professionals, for advice.
Information sharing through social networks is seen as an important element of CAM use, particularly as a result of citizens' personal experience, which seems to influence initial and repeated use of alternative medicine. This was the finding from studies in nine European countries. The trend of attitudes to CAM being shaped by personal experience was also observed for biomedical professions and students of such professions.

In Europe, there are more than 180,000 registered and certified non-medical CAM practitioners. This amounts to 65 CAM providers per 100,000 inhabitants, as compared to the EU figures of 95 general medical practitioners per 100,000 inhabitants. However, regulation of and education in CAM is different in each of the 39 European countries studied.

Speaking at the final conference of the European research network for complementary and alternative medicine (CAMbrella), Professor Vinjar Fonnebo, director of the Norwegian Institute for CAM research at the University of Tromso, said: 'The current EU regulation and education chaos for CAM provision makes it impossible for health professionals to give safety and security to their patients and clients.'

His comments follow a three-year study showing that CAM is a neglected area of research and knowledge, and that it differs across countries. In particular, it was revealed that Europe lags behind North America, Asia and Australia in its approach to CAM. This underlines the need for a centralised and coordinated effort to enhance knowledge within this field. In addition, researchers at the conference stressed the need for a coordinated European approach by presenting a roadmap for European CAM research.

Professor Jarle Aaarbacke, rector of the University of Tromso, believes research is key: 'CAM is not part of the medicine we teach and learn in European universities, but it is nevertheless used by large numbers of patients and providers across Europe, so [it is better that] we understand more about it.'

Professor Benno Brinkhaus, who led the event, concludes: 'If CAM is to be employed as part of the solution to the healthcare challenges we face in 2020, it is vital to obtain reliable information on its cost, safety and effectiveness in real world settings. CAMbrella's vision is for an evidence base which enables European citizens and policymakers to make informed decisions about CAM.' For more information, please visit:

CAMbrella
http://www.cambrella.eu/home.php

Alliance for Natural Health