Reviewer's report

Title: Prevalence and factors associated with the use of complementary and alternative medicine practitioners in 8 countries of the former Soviet Union

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Reviewer: Samuel M Brown

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This is an interesting study that merits consideration.

Unfortunately the survey instrument has substantial flaws that severely limit generalizability.

First, “folk medicine” varies in meaning from country to country. It is often pejorative, depending on the context.

Second “folk medicine” is only a very small part of CAM in the countries of the former Soviet Union.

Third, as the authors note, “mainstream” physicians will also commonly prescribe or employ CAM therapies, as would neighbors, family members, or other less formal healers.

Fourth, the authors don’t acknowledge the incredible diversity of non-Western therapies that range from biomedical-sounding (various low intensity lasers shone on skin and occasionally on the blood through an intravenous catheter) to clearly non-biomedical sounding (shamanism) throughout the former Soviet Union.

Bioanthropological field work would likely help the authors appreciate the diversity that lurks behind familiar terms and limits the generalizability of the findings from this survey instrument.

Given reports from other studies of the near-ubiquity of CAM in Russia, for instance, the reported rates have low face validity, unless they are restricted to a very limited subset of CAM therapies. As minimum possible prevalence values, or as assays of the prevalence of a very specific subset of CAM, or perhaps in the interests of licensing particular types of practitioners, this study may have some utility, but it should not be read as an accurate representation of the diversity and prevalence of non-Western, non-evidence-based treatments that are currently employed in the former Soviet Union.
