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by Kevin M. Smith
Staff Writer

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Alternative health
a growing industry in the county

Nancy Smith, a registered nurse who works part-time in the intensive care unit at Frederick Memorial Hospital, was so impressed with acupuncture as a patient that she decided to become a practitioner.

She received her master's degree in acupuncture from the Tai Sophia Institute for the Healing Arts in Laurel about a year ago, and has opened an office at 214 W. Patrick St., Frederick.

Smith is one of the growing number of alternative health care providers in Frederick and across the nation.

According to a 2004 report by the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine and the National Center for Health Statistics of the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 36 percent of American adults are using some form of alternative medicine or therapy.

The study didn't report spending on such health care, but the centers' 1997 report said Americans spent between \$36 billion and \$47 billion on alternative therapies that year. That includes between \$12 billion and \$20 billion paid out-of-pocket -- more than the public paid out-of-pocket for all hospitalizations in 1997 and about half of what it



Tom Fedor/ The Gazette

Nancy Smith, a registered nurse, studied acupuncture and opened her practice in Frederick after her own treatment proved helpful. Smith is one of the growing number of alternative health care providers in the county.

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paid for all out-of-pocket physician services. Additionally, \$5 billion in out-of-pocket spending was on herbal products."

The National Institutes of Health in Bethesda defines alternative medicine or alternative health care as "a group of diverse medical and health care systems, practices and products that are not presently considered to be part of conventional medicine -- that is, medicine as practiced by holders of M.D. [medical doctor] or D.O. [doctor of osteopathy] degrees and their allied health professionals, such as physical therapists, psychologists and registered nurses."

The alternative field's more popular treatments include acupuncture, therapeutic massage, chiropractic care and yoga. Frederick County has more than 100 combined listings for these practitioners, with a handful offering more than one method.

Ted Cmarada, a licensed social worker and psychotherapist who founded the Center for Integrative Healthcare on Park Avenue behind Frederick Memorial Hospital, said the name of his practice represents his perspective.

"I like to think of it as integrative rather than alternative health care," he said.

Cmarada, something of a holistic pioneer in Frederick, opened his practice -- which includes therapeutic massage, meditation, acupuncture and yoga, in addition to group therapy and counseling -- back in 1990 when, as he put it, "People here didn't really know what the term 'wellness' meant."

When he opened his practice, he said, there were only one or two yoga instructors in town and an acupuncturist.

Now some of these practices are not only accepted by mainstream providers, but they are recommended, prescribed or even practiced by them.

Smith said she approached acupuncture with some trepidation as to its effectiveness when she was first treated. She was impressed, but cautions, "I don't recommend acupuncture in place of traditional treatment, but as a supplement to it. If someone has pain in their shoulder, or some other location, he or she should still consult a physician."

Increasingly, insurance covers alternative treatments, though some alternative practitioners don't accept insurance because of the amount of paperwork required by carriers.

Chiropractors, who generally charge between \$35 and \$50 per visit, used to hang signs in their windows reading, "We do not accept insurance." Now, many do.

"About 75 percent of our patients are insurance-based," said Brandon Steinbar, a chiropractor who opened the Ballenger Creek Chiropractic office on Solarex Court in Frederick in 2003.

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Steinbar, who said it's too early to see trends developing in his client base, said his practice is growing.

"The increase is hard to project out, because sometimes the projected goals are in patient exams rather than in dollar amounts," he said.

Ileana Sutter, an Austrian immigrant who works with Cmarada's Center for Integrative Healthcare, is currently opening her own massage therapy location, renting a room at the GiGi Marie Spa on Seventh Street, across from Frederick Memorial Hospital. Sutter, who also performs shiatsu and reiki, is trying to crack the insurance barrier.

"BlueCross BlueShield has a list of 2,500 massage therapists in their system," Sutter said. "Right now I am looking into how to get included on that list."

Her clients may be eligible for insurance reimbursement if they have a physician's referral, which happens occasionally.

Another relative newcomer to the local alternative health care industry is Dorcas Quynn, who opened SolYoga at 256 W. Patrick St. two months ago. Quynn said she would like to see the venture grow into more than a part-time gig.

"Right now, I work in real estate, so that gives me the flexibility to run the studio," Quynn said. Averaging eight students per class, Quynn said the studio can accommodate 20.

More information on alternative health care is available at www.nccam.nih.gov.

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