## New Age Medicine Still on the Ascent

The use of alternative medicine has been rising steadily and is widespread throughout the United States, according to a survey by Harvard researchers.

Epidemiologist Ronald Kessler and colleagues called 2049 people over 18 to ask about their use of 20 types of alternative therapy including acupuncture, megavitamin therapy, chiropractic, and "energy healing." They conclude, in the 21 August *Annals of Internal Medicine*, that alternative medicine is no passing fad, but "the result of a secular trend that began at least a half century ago."

Of the respondents, 1386 had used some alternative therapy, and of those, almost half were long-term devotees. Women, whites, Westerners, the college-educated, and people under 50 are most likely to use such therapies. But the upward trend has been uniform among all groups, the authors write—which "suggests a continuing increased demand ... that will affect all facets of health care delivery over the next 25 years."

**Yoga: American as apple pie?**

Some therapies hold steady: Homeopathy use has hovered around 3% for decades, says Kessler. But herbal remedies have become wildly popular since a 1994 law exempted them from Food and Drug Administration requirements. Aromatherapy has also taken off.

Although Kessler sees the growth of alternative therapies as "part of a larger trend of people taking charge of their own health," not everyone puts such a positive spin on it. Antiquackery crusader Wallace Sampson of Stanford University School of Medicine says the Harvard group is trying to legitimize what is still a "fringe" phenomenon. He says the study "grossly overestimated" the popularity of alternative medicine by including time-honored practices such as self-help groups and relaxation.

## *JAMA* Duped by Inuit Story

*The Journal of the American Medical Association* (*JAMA*) has admitted that it unwittingly published a fictional account last year about an Inuit elder who took his life by walking out onto the Arctic ice.

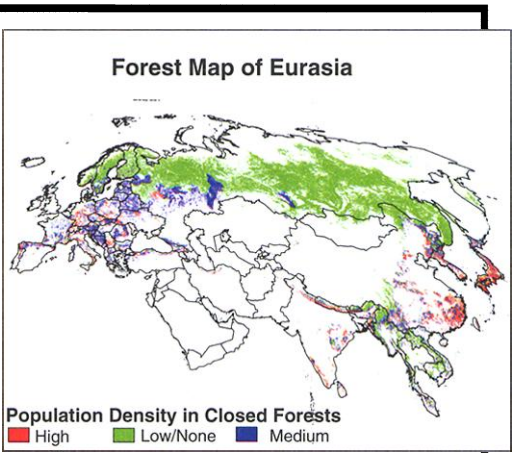
The essay was written by physician Shetel Shah of Durham, North Carolina, who had done a medical school rotation in an Alaska village clinic. In the 18 October 2000 issue of *JAMA*, Shah recounted how the 97-year-old elder told him that he had once been a great whaler and carver but was now useless. After the man's family paid their final respects, Shah wrote, he took to the ice and "slowly vanished into the early-morning fog."

Shah's former supervisor, Michael Swenson of the Norton Sound Health Corp. in Nome, Alaska, said in a letter in last week's *JAMA* that no such elder ever appeared at the clinic, and that the Inuits esteem their old people. *JAMA* editor Catherine DeAngelis says Shah's "lack of integrity ... impugns our reputation." But Shah, in a response in the same issue, says the essay is based on stories he heard and "falls well within the limits of artistic license." Former *JAMA* editor George Lundberg seems inclined to agree. "In my view," he says, "the tempest is outsized for the teapot."

## Savable Forest

Much of what's left of Earth's shrinking forest lies in a handful of countries in sparsely populated areas. That means conservationists could get the most bang for their buck by targeting these least threatened forests for protection, according to a report based on a new global forest map from the U.N. Environment Program (UNEP) and several U.S. agencies.

The map, made entirely from satellite data rather than on-the-ground inventories, depicts 2.87 billion hectares of "closed forest," defined as at least 40% canopy cover. Of this amount, which represents about one-fifth of total land area, 80% lies in 15 countries and half lies in just three countries—Russia, Canada, and Brazil. Less than 10% of all that forest is protected right now.




## Aging and the Single Cell

A study using middle-aged mice has shown that the changes brought on by aging are detectable in individual cells that drive the body's biological clock.

People's daily rhythms deteriorate with age, which causes sleep problems. The same is true of mice. When kept in the dark 24 hours a day, juveniles sleep at regular intervals, but middle-aged mice exhibit irregular sleep.

Research has linked this difference to the suprachiasmatic nucleus (SCN), the brain's daily timekeeper. To see whether this disruption arises at the level of individual neurons or results from their interaction, neuroscientist Gene Block and colleagues at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville recorded the electrical activity of mouse SCN neurons cultured in such low concentrations that they were unlikely to communicate with one another.

In the September issue of *Neuroscience*, they report that eight neurons from middle-aged mice beat irregularly for days in the dish, while the 12 young adult cells remained robustly rhythmic. The research suggests that overall decline in SCN behavior is driven in large part by the deterioration of individual neurons, says neuroscientist Martha Harrington of Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts.

Paradoxically, though, the researchers observed that aging appears to disrupt the rhythmicity of single cells more severely than it does the animals' overall behavior as measured by their sleep patterns. Block says that raises an interesting biological question: "How do you get reliability [despite] unreliable parts?"

CREDITS: (TOP) BETTMANN/CORBIS; (BOTTOM) AN ASSESSMENT OF THE STATUS OF THE WORLD'S REMAINING FORESTS, UNEP (2001)