



## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

1 Pennington Street, London E98 1TA. Telephone: 020-7782 5000  
Fax: 020-7782 5046 e-mail: letters@thetimes.co.uk

---

### Regulating complementary medicine

*From Professor D. Colquhoun, FRS*

Sir, Congratulations on your report on the deficiencies found in complementary medicine practitioners (Body & Soul, January 10). In the face of such evidence it is natural to ask for more effective regulation of this very profitable industry. But the question is *quis custodiet ipsos custodes?* This question has serious implications for the universities as well as for the public (and the industry).

The House of Lords report and the Government's response to it pointed out that the first step was to find out whether the complementary treatment worked (better than a placebo). They recommended that the Department of Health should fund research on complementary medicine, the first priority being to find out whether each therapy worked.

The problem is that you cannot regulate properly an area when it is not, in most cases, known whether the product being offered has no effect above that of wishful thinking. This raises a serious question for universities, because it leads, naturally enough, to demands for better training. But how can a university run a course on a subject about which there is so little hard evidence?

Tragically (for their own reputation), some of the new universities are running three-year BSc courses in such subjects as complementary therapies. I'm quite happy to believe that nice smells produce good placebo effects, but aromatherapy is not, by any stretch of the imagination, science, and in my view it is not honest to award Bachelor of Science degrees in it.

The effect of such courses will be not to promote better regulation, but to give spurious respectability to an industry that, according to the Government, should (but does not) have, as its first priority, to find out what works and what doesn't.

Yours faithfully,  
DAVID COLQUHOUN,  
A. J. Clark Professor of  
Pharmacology,  
University College London,  
Gower Street, WC1E 6BT.  
d.colquhoun@ucl.ac.uk  
January 10.

*From Mr Michael Dooley*

Sir, Your survey on complementary medicine practitioners mentioned the lack of communication with GPs. Not only must the consent of the patient be obtained to contact the GP — and not all will agree — but GPs must remember to contact the complementary medicine practitioner.

We must also not forget the hospital consultant in the loop. As a consultant gynaecologist I realise how important it is to have a flow of information in order to treat my patients. To encourage this I have developed a co-operation card to be filled in at each visit to any practitioner and carried around by the patient. An easy and effective way to develop a true integrated healthcare approach.

Yours faithfully,  
MICHAEL DOOLEY  
(Consultant gynaecologist),  
Winterbourne Hospital,  
Herringston Road,  
Dorchester, Dorset DT1 2DR.  
January 10.

---