

Published in Flare's September 2007 issue

TEAM YOU

Liza Finlay counts the players in the modern girl's health entourage

Photography, Daniel Harrison



I've learned to be skeptical of one-size-fits-all when it comes to fashion. Yet, for years, when it comes to my health, that's the very approach I've taken: my family doctor has been the one and only game in town for me, from aches and pains to vitamins.

So, when a bunch of my friends started describing their posses of practitioners—including naturopathic doctors, nutritionists and trainers—I wondered, do I need a posse, too? For that matter, do we all? I mean, if half of Hollywood has an herbalist, shouldn't you?

As the so-called "alternative" medicines hovering at the periphery of health care become increasingly mainstream, the prospect of the health-care posse becomes more and more likely. According to the Environics Research Group, 70 percent of us are taking day-to-day health matters into our own hands, fortifying ourselves with an entourage of health-care providers.

Whether this trend is driven by our modern tastes and a broader understanding of our own bodies or the incredible shrinking resources in "Western" medicine is hard to say. Roughly five million Canadians currently don't have a family doctor they can access regularly, according to one Environics study. And the Canadian Institute for Health Information notes that the number of medical graduates choosing the field of family practice has dropped sharply. What about those already practising? Overbooked. In the meantime, the number of chiropractic and naturopathic licences issued is growing. There is one thing we can count on: our expectations of having one doctor who's willing to and

Published in Flare's September 2007 issue

capable of weighing in on all aspects of our health is as antiquated a notion as a physician who makes house calls with a stethoscope and a little black bag.

But how big a posse does the modern girl require? If I already have a nutritionist, do I need a naturopath, too? Putting together the pieces of what can be a puzzling array of possibilities calls for savvy. You could follow Madonna's lead and take one of everything, please, but managing such an unwieldy team has its challenges and inherent dangers. Instead, the shrewd woman must construct an entourage custom-tailored to fit her health and lifestyle needs.

Experts like Dr. Melissa Hershberg, a medical doctor with The Toronto Clinic, suggest that a good posse includes an MD and a naturopathic doctor (ND). (The Toronto Clinic is a health-care facility where business executives are sent by their companies to receive preventive whole-body care after they're assessed by a team—integrative treatment that's usually not covered by provincial health care.) Such experts recommend, too, that a nutritionist and a trainer, both of whom specialize in the kind of noninvasive prevention that is typically given light treatment in Western medical schools, be included as well. Then, of course, there are optional add-ons, such as a chiropractor, maybe an allergist (for ragweed season) and a massage therapist.

Each member of a team brings a different form of expertise to the table, and patients benefit from that," says Dr. Hershberg. "People are more informed about health than they ever have been before. They want their health-care providers to give them full information from a variety of perspectives. They're not satisfied with a doc who writes a prescription and that's it. An informed public doesn't take the doctor's word as gospel." The movement away from doctor-as-God to doctor-as-team-manager is a powerful paradigm shift. It even comes with its own label: integrative medicine. And people are wearing the label from coast to coast. The integrated team at The Toronto Clinic is just one example; in Calgary, at the Santé Spa, clients can work out, get a physical, visit a nutritionist and even receive life coaching—all under one roof. Most integrative-medicine advocates agree that the biggest benefit of an entourage is that health is treated

Published in Flare's September 2007 issue

proactively. "An ND focuses on prevention and treatment, whereas an MD focuses primarily on treatment," sums up Toronto-based naturopathic doctor Christine Matheson. Dr. Hershberg agrees: "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. That's a no-brainer. But few doctors are practising preventive medicine because they just don't have the time. It takes a long time to get to the bottom of not just existing troubles but future risks as well. It requires long conversations about lifestyle and emotions."

For the full article, pick up your copy of FLARE – in newsstands now

Tips for building your own health entourage:

- Family doctor: If you have an MD who maintains an open mind about other forms of health care, recruit him or her to be the quarterback of your wellness posse—it's important that one person has a record of the different sorts of care you're drawing upon.
- Naturopathic doctor: While your MD is best suited to deal with tangible health problems, your ND's approach is designed to be the least invasive and is often preventative.
- After those key people are in place, it's up to you: some health practices may overlap (dermatology and cosmetic surgery, for example), so it's key for you to discuss with, say, your chiropractor if you're also consulting an osteopath. Check in with your naturopathic doctor, who is generally a good source of information on alternative therapies. Just remember: always keep your doctors informed about treatments you're getting from other sources.