



7750 Montpelier Road
Laurel, Maryland 20723
www.tai.edu

410-888-9048
301-725-1674
800-735-2968
410-888-9004 Fax

Statement of Sister Charlotte R. Kerr, RSM
Hearing of the Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions
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My task today is to set the stage for this hearing, entitled “Principles of Integrated Health, A Path to Health Care Reform.” We share a sense that this time of crisis in national health care brings an opportunity for profound change in the structure and the content of our health care.

Today, we will talk about just what is an integrated approach to health care? Who are we — who are the people involved in integrated health care? What do we feel is necessary to re-create our health care system and help restore vitality to America?

What we mean by “integrated health care” is expressed so well by my colleague Jim Gordon, and I agree with his description: It is an approach to health care that includes those forms of helping and healing — whether previously described as conventional, complementary or alternative — which have proven to be most effective, and makes them available to all Americans in comprehensive and individualized programs.

We need to include in our health care system meditation and medication, acupuncture and surgery, group support in sustaining programs of self-care as well as individual diagnosis, and consultation in designing these programs. Of course, at the core of all health is the quality of our community health.

There’s not one of us in this room who could create a blade of grass this spring, not one of us who could cure a cough this winter — all of us in health care are only assisting nature to do what it can do. Not one of us could provide a nutritious diet to our families if the land has lost its nutrients and spirit, or if the water is tainted or toxic. No health care system — no matter how integrated — can support the body politic without the health of the planet.

Jim Gordon’s clarity can’t be beat here. He says that we need to recover the perspective in which the highest quality of health care is seen as promoting personal, emotional, social, and spiritual fulfillment. And we must develop educational systems and programs that manifest this perspective.

For all of us serving in health care, we need to rededicate ourselves to the vocation to which we have been called — to heal and to serve.

Who are we in integrated health care?

We are people serving in health care — people who saw a deficiency in the present health care model and began the journey to reclaim an ecological model of health and healing (an approach that recognizes the interrelationship of the health of the individual, the environment, the community and the wider society). Many of these people hold credentials in traditional Western medicine as well as other licensed health care modalities.

I'll give you a cameo of my own health care credentials, which reflects the kind of experience many people bring to this growing movement. I have experience working in a leprosy hospital as a registered nurse, managing patient care at the diabetes clinic at the University of Maryland, and clinical experience in geriatrics and pediatrics. I have a master's in public health, and served as an assistant professor at the University of Maryland School of Nursing. I have a master's in traditional acupuncture, and for 32 years have served as a practitioner and faculty member at Tai Sophia Institute.

What brings us here today began as a quiet revolution by patients and practitioners; and now, it is a social movement.

At the beginning, many people viewed elements of this new paradigm as exotic — acupuncture, for example, and herbal medicine, and bioenergy. Today, many aspects of this movement are mainstream — even common sense.

Nixon's trip to China in 1972 exposed millions of citizens to other modalities of health care. We went from the Nixon trip to the Eisenberg study, which showed that in 1997, 42 percent of Americans were using alternative therapies. Then on to the White House Commission on Complementary and Alternative Medicine in 2002.

What's called "complementary and alternative medicine" and "integrative medicine" has gone from exotic to mainstream. Some researchers estimate that 70 percent of Americans currently use a form of complementary therapy.

This committee, under the direction of Senator Kennedy, has done pioneering work.

Then there is Senator Harkin's faithful work at the NIH and the Office of Complementary and Alternative Medicine.

Senator Mikulski, your work to get women included in research protocol at NIH, and in establishment of offices of women's health at NIH and FDA has led to amazing results.

As this committee deliberates on health care reform, we recommend that it truly focus on:

1. Reformation and transformation of our system — essentially, bring new thinking that is better for people and has better outcomes — outcomes that can be sustained through practices of self-care. Our current system is not producing health, and it costs too much. All Americans need a health care safety net for the ease of their minds and hearts.
2. Health promotion and prevention. We need to have a system that regards health promotion and prevention as important as treatment.
3. We need a renewal of the education of health care professionals. My colleagues will elaborate on this need.

These points (and so many others, such as care for the healers, and mind-body-spirit care) will be stated, validated, and further explored today as we discuss integrated health care. Finally, I offer one more point:

4. The establishment of an Office of Health and Wellness. At this time, it seems clear and necessary that in order to forward this transformation in health care, an Office of Health and Wellness should be established at the White House under the health czar. This office would guide policy and legislation focused on creating a wellness culture and industry.

Hope is the action we take right now for our future — even though we stand in unknowing about that future. We trust ourselves to find a new way to heal and to serve.

As we go through this evolving cultural transformation,

- We know that new structures do need to be born.
- We cannot be stopped by circumstances.
- We will concentrate on the rightness of this vision of integrated health care, and trust we are working for the common good of the people of the United States of America. In President Obama's inaugural address, he said, "Starting today, we must pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, and begin again the work of remaking America. Everywhere we look there is work to be done."
- We are ready and willing, and expect to be surprised by the transformed health care system that will manifest!