



## A DREAM CLINIC

A stunning new Manhattan center offers the best of East and West.

BY DIANE GUERNSEY

It's no secret that Americans are avidly interested in complementary or alternative medicine (CAM)—at last count, some 45 percent were using it. Mirroring their interest, a number of medical centers across the country have begun to offer CAM therapies alongside Western treatments, in a fusion known as integrative medicine. Last spring a notable newcomer joined their ranks: Beth Israel's Continuum Center for Health and Healing.

The center, located on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan, is headed by internist Woodson Merrell, an accomplished practitioner of integrative medicine for more than a decade. A tall, auburn-haired man with a gentle, soft-spoken manner, Dr. Merrell ("Woody" to his friends and colleagues) first encountered CAM at age one, when a German doctor cured his croup with a homeopathic remedy. In college he mixed

his premed courses with studies in yoga and meditation; after graduating from Columbia University's College of Physicians and Surgeons (where he now teaches), he traveled to Beijing, Shanghai, Tanzania, Trinidad and elsewhere to study acupuncture, traditional remedies, herbal and tropical medicine, homeopathy and nutrition. "I wove it all together," he says. "By the late eighties, I'd developed an integrative practice that was grounded in Western medicine."

Two years ago, the board of Beth Israel Medical Center made Dr. Merrell a visionary offer: create a \$5 million state-of-the-art integrative medical center staffed by top CAM-trained practitioners working in collaboration with Beth Israel's conventional staff and affiliates.

The proposed center enjoyed enthusiastic support from Beth Israel trustees such as board member William Sarnoff, whose first wife had lost her life to colon cancer. "We saw a lot of extraordinarily able oncologists and got the best and the latest treatments," he says. "Everybody was very competent, but no one gave any attention to my wife other than as a disease, as opposed to a person with a disease. It seemed to me that that was just wrong—and though I don't think she'd have survived even if another approach had been taken, I'm confident that her quality of life would have been better. That energized my involvement with the center."

**A NEW BREED OF HEALERS** Dr. Merrell has recruited a wide array of CAM-trained clinicians (most of whom have brought bustling practices with them). Medical director Benjamin Kligler, for instance, is a family physician who also practices hypnosis, homeopathy, Chinese herbal remedies and shiatsu massage. "We have three family physicians, two internists, a pediatrician, two gynecologists, one physician's assistant, a psychiatrist-homeopath, a clinical nurse specialist, a psychologist who specializes in mind-body therapies, a nutritionist, an acupuncturist, a chiropractor, a yoga instructor and a massage therapist," Dr. Merrell reels off. "We also have visiting specialists: a urologist, a neurologist, a cardiologist, an ophthalmologist and doctors of rehabilitative medicine and infectious disease."

**HEALING BY DESIGN** The center itself possesses a serene beauty that passes into the spiritual (the ecosensitive architects Guenther Petrarca used natural, nontoxic and recycled materials and consulted with feng shui master Alex Stark). Limestone tiles and a creamy, undulating ceiling adorn the entrance hall. The huge, remarkably airy waiting area offers large, inviting sofas, vibrant Tibetan wool rugs, a tea bar and a library. No tinny canned music intrudes; the aura of peace is almost palpable. Wrote one new patient: "The minute I stepped off the elevator, I began to feel better."

**WHO GOES THERE?** "First of all, people who are holistically minded, who make a very earnest commitment to preventive health care," says internist Roberta Lee. "Second, people with complex medical conditions—cancers, chronic



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pain—who haven't responded to conventional medicine."

Among the first group is Meggan Friedman, who consulted Dr. Kligler as an expectant mother and whose baby daughter, Grace, became the center's very first patient. "I wanted someone with a more holistic approach. For an ear infection, I tend not to go to antibiotics immediately, and it was good just knowing that Ben would be open to exploring other avenues," she says.

How does a visit with an integrative physician differ from the norm? "I take a history and physical, just like any other doctor," says Dr. Merrell. "But I go much more into spiritual and emotional and lifestyle factors."

"When I met Dr. Merrell, I was so impressed," says Carole Bellidora, who works in client development for Van Cleef & Arpels. "Here was a doctor who really wanted to know how I was feeling, physically, mentally and emotionally." Ten years ago, suffering from

"incredible" fatigue, Bellidora told Dr. Merrell she'd dreamed that she had Lyme disease. Though skeptical, he tested her—and found that she was right. "He's also very good with stress management," she says. "I used to catch colds all winter; now I never get the flu or anything."

Offering what is perhaps the integrative philosophy in a nutshell, Dr. Merrell says, "I give patients the safest, gentlest remedy that has the best chance of working. Let's say someone comes in with lower-back pain. The possible treatments include Advil and muscle relaxants; they also include physical therapy, chiropractic, acupuncture or osteopathy. You can do many things, and often a combination of things works even better."

**THE "I" WORD** What about insurance? What's covered depends on your policy. Conventional treatments performed by a physician are covered as usual; some policies also cover chiropractic or

acupuncture. The center is negotiating with insurers to obtain more comprehensive coverage. A first-time, one-hour visit runs from \$125 to \$350; follow-up visits cost \$75 to \$250.

**A NEW AGE** Dr. Merrell sees the center as a portent of things to come. "We now have a tremendous amount of good research about these therapies," he says. "We're integrating the best of whatever works—whether traditional remedies or new therapies that have stood up to scientific testing. This is the medicine of the future."

**TOP CAM CENTERS** Continuum Center for Health and Healing, New York City, 646-935-2220; [www.wehealny.org](http://www.wehealny.org).

California Pacific Medical Center Health & Healing Clinic, San Francisco, 415-923-3503.

Cedars-Sinai Integrative Medicine Medical Group, Los Angeles, 800-233-2771.

Program in Integrative Medicine, University of Arizona, P.O. Box 245153, Tucson, AZ 85724. (There is a two-year waiting list.) ✕

