

Many treatments 'unproven'

by Angela Gregory

More than half mainstream medicine is "unproven" and that exposes a double standard in attitudes to alternative healing, a doctor has told a medico-legal conference.

Dr Tane Taylor said the term "unproven" was used to describe alternative and complementary medicines, but the same term could apply to more than 50 per cent of what was commonly known as mainstream medicine.

Dr Taylor, a former clinical director at Middlemore Hospital, told the conference in Wellington that alternative therapies were routinely discounted.

Yet in general practice, 53 per cent of what doctors did had not been substantiated by randomised, controlled trials.

The New Zealand Medical Association, of which he was a member, believed alternative

treatments should be subject to the same evidence-based scientific testing as conventional medicine.

If that did not happen, those promoting alternative treatments should not make unproven claims about their efficacy, as patients had the right to be protected from exploitation.

Dr Taylor said he basically agreed with that but saw a double standard, "one for the doctors . . . and another for whoever is left out".

It seemed to be acceptable for doctors to continue practising without scientific rigour, but not for others.

"I am not advocating anarchy," said Dr Taylor.

"I am merely highlighting the profession's self-perpetuated polarisation in the health sector.

"Because one wears a white coat and a stethoscope and places Dr in front and MBChB behind their name, it gives them the right

to practise unproven therapies without further study and qualifications."

Doctors should admit they were not well acquainted with a particular intervention or treatment instead of writing it off as unheard of and therefore dangerous.

That was particularly important as patients began to research their conditions on the internet, he said.

"As physicians we need to keep focused on the most important components of the health system — the patients.

"At all times we should remind ourselves of the fundamental purpose of medicine itself — to cure sometimes, to relieve often, to comfort always."

Dr Taylor said there was no place in modern medicine for patronising attitudes.

"It is pretty prominent unfortunately."