

# integrative medicine:

The Future of Veteran Care?

| By Carolyn Heneghan



Veteran care is a crucial aspect of the healthcare system, and from alleviating pain to combating PTSD, doctors have worked tirelessly to find solutions for healing the men and women who serve our country. When traditional methods falter, alternatives are sought, and one alternative and complementary approach that is gaining momentum is integrative medicine.

**E**nter Dr. Henri Roca, Chief of Integrative Medicine for the Central Arkansas Veterans Administration Hospital and program manager for the Integrative Medicine Patient Aligned Care Team (IMPACT) for Pain Clinic. Dr. Roca has developed and participated in integrative medicine initiatives throughout the country, and he most recently dedicated his medical career to serving veterans in the realm of integrative primary care.

#### **Dr. Henri Roca's Path to Integrative Medicine**

Integrative medicine has always been a part of Dr. Roca's career aspirations. Even before attending LSU Medical School, he started



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out as a massage therapist and worked with herbs, vitamins, and supplements and other mind and body interventions.

Following medical school, Dr. Roca spent four years as the Division of Integrative Medicine Section Chief and integrative medicine clinician at LSU Health Sciences Center. He then traveled up to Greenwich, Conn., where he created the Greenwich Hospital Center for Integrative Medicine.

Dr. Roca followed his career path in integrative medicine to Arkansas where he collaborated with Dr. Matthew Jennings, Associate Chief of Staff for primary care in the Central Arkansas Veterans Healthcare System.

"[Dr. Jennings] wanted someone to be truly patient-centered—not just to give more pills, not just to do different kinds of more invasive interventions, but to really try to help the individual veteran understand what may be driving their pain, and, wherever possible, reverse their pain in as natural a means as possible," said Dr. Roca. "The idea that it could be done here at a veterans' hospital was very intriguing."

#### **Integrative Medicine at the VA**

With support from Dr. Jennings, Dr. Roca implemented a program that combines a wide range of alternative and complementary primary care services to create a true



support, among others.

His work at the VA integrates all of these different branches of treatment within the framework of primary care. This differs from a traditional sense of alternative and complementary medicine wherein a patient might see a specialist for certain ailments rather than a full health consultation. Here, a patient is referred to the clinic by his or her own primary care doctor. Dr. Roca and the clinic assume the role of primary care provider, and then all of the different services are available to that patient.

As a part of this integrative approach to patient care, Dr. Roca also embraces functional medicine, which he defines as “understanding the underlying drivers of health or of illness—not just about diagnosis, but about understanding what sort of imbalances exist within us that ultimately drive to the expression of symptoms and diagnoses.”

He describes symptoms and diagnoses as the tip of an iceberg. They do not show the entirety of the health issue at hand, including

lot of time on is understanding that everything that we have ever done in our lives ultimately contributes to where we are now.”

He continues, “We want to understand how a person works. Those things may have been watershed moments in their life that actually led them to a predictable place of illness. If we understand that, we can work to reverse that.”

Once this root problem is identified and the variety of services available have been implemented, Dr. Roca then empowers his patients to take care of their health individually through the life choices they make. When Dr. Roca feels that his patients are empowered in their own healthcare, he returns them to their original primary care physician for further treatment.

### The Future of Integrative Medicine

“People here are very realistic,” says Roca. “They know that there is a challenge working with everyone in this country when it comes to pain, but especially working with veterans when it comes to pain. They all know that medication alone is not doing a very good job of it, so we need to find new and different ways of doing this.”

While pieces of integrative medicine are being practiced elsewhere in the country, Dr. Roca says his coordination of integrative services under the umbrella of a primary care framework is unique and not yet being replicated at any other VA, academic health center or private clinic in the country. But Dr. Roca has high hopes that this initiative will catch on for the benefit of veteran care.

“Integrative medicine is our single best chance to reduce the burden of our healthcare system and the burden of cost that it gives to the overall economy,” says Dr. Roca. “We need to empower patients; we need to return patients to a better place of health. We need for patients, individuals, to be empowered in their own health, and I think that integrative medicine is the best path to get us to that goal.” ■

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healthcare experience, rather than an illness suppression experience, for the veterans he sees.

Dr. Roca uses what he calls a “density of different interventions” to support and empower a patient to a better place of health. These include acupuncture, different types of yoga and movement interventions, hypnotherapy, biofeedback, mind-body approaches, stress management, nutritional counseling, physical therapy, and other mental and behavioral health

its root cause. This cause can stem from a wide range of life choices, from where patients live and the food they eat to different exposures and emotions experienced over a lifetime. Finding the root of these issues is crucial to the integrative and functional medicine processes.

“The individual’s story is paramount,” says Dr. Roca. “It is extremely important to hear not only what the individual veteran is concerned about, but also their entire life history. Something that people really don’t spend a