



On a positive note

The Living Well Lab proves to be a useful tool to track health and wellness

by **Andrea Mulkins and Dave Boyack**

Many of us have heard how complementary medicine has been used for thousands of years in numerous cultures throughout the world. But does it really work? Does it really improve people's health?

What we today refer to as complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) was the foundation for treating a range of ailments, aches, and pains long before Western medicine emerged as our primary form of health care. Centuries ago, Greek, Chinese, and other societies used CAM to improve the health of their citizens. Still, some critics and skeptics dismiss the effectiveness of alternative therapies, claiming a lack of "proof."

An interesting story is emerging about the effectiveness of CAM right here in Vancouver. The Living Well Lab (LWL) is a project funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research that operates through the Vancouver Friends For Life Society (FFL). The LWL evolved out of a series of discussions initiated by J. Evin Jones, Co-Executive Director of FFL, with representatives from the BC Persons With AIDS (BCPWA) Society. In 2004, both organizations were offering naturopathic services to their members, and Evin sought a way to collaborate in providing CAM services to people living with life threatening illnesses, including HIV. Representatives from FFL and the BCPWA Society formed a committee to further explore ideas around this project and subsequently launched the Living Well Lab.

Today, the LWL is an online resource for FFL members that helps them track their general sense of well-being and record any changes or improvements to their health. It also functions as an evaluation tool for FFL programs since data indicates that the CAM therapies provided by FFL have made a significant difference in the wellness of their members.

During 2007, over one-quarter of FFL members completed a series of surveys, participated in one-to-one interviews, and attended focus group sessions related to the LWL. Their involvement has provided valuable insight into how CAM has impacted their quality of life. Preliminary data demonstrates how CAM therapies have significantly improved members' overall health and well-being.

Some of the key findings from the LWL research include the following:

- ▶ Participants have complex health issues; the most common concerns are HIV, depression, and pain
- ▶ Nearly half of participants deal with mental health issues
- ▶ Members have experienced significant improvements in energy levels, as well as decreased levels of pain and stress through CAM therapies
- ▶ Members have experienced a range of positive changes since coming to FFL, including: decreased anxiety, and increased confidence related to improved health and an enhanced social network
- ▶ The most popular CAM therapies are: vitamins, traditional Chinese medicine, massage therapy, naturopathy, and healthy lifestyle activities such as exercise and eating organic foods
- ▶ Half of focus group participants do not communicate with their medical doctors about CAM use
- ▶ Focus group participants who do speak with their doctors about CAM use have some reservations about sharing this information
- ▶ Some participants are frustrated with having to educate their doctors about CAM use and some don't discuss CAM with their doctor because their doctor never inquires

FFL staff are examining the preliminary data and discussing ways to integrate the insights of members at the Wellness Centre. We hope these findings will not only demonstrate the effectiveness of CAM, but that FFL and the BCPWA Society can better meet members' needs and plan for expanded services. If you have any questions about the LWL, our preliminary findings, or how you can support or become involved with the project, please contact Andrea Mulkins, LWL Coordinator at andrea@friendsforlife.ca. ☎



Andrea Mulkins is the coordinator of the Living Well Lab and **Dave Boyack** is a peer researcher on the project.