

# Potential risks of complementary alternative medicine in infants and children

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## ABSTRACT

Complementary Alternative Medicine (CAM) poses significant risks when applied to infants and children. Our objective is to examine notable instances of CAM usage among parents, unlicensed individuals, and even licensed healthcare practitioners. It is concerning that complications arising from CAM treatments are often overlooked by regulatory bodies and legal authorities. Even licensed healthcare professionals who have profited from misrepresenting evidence-based

practices for disease treatment or prevention have seldom faced sanctions from their respective regulatory bodies. This status quo needs to change. Furthermore, there is an urgent need for regulatory agencies, including government bodies, to take legal action against the promotion and sale of dubious CAM products and devices within their jurisdictions. Strengthening existing regulations must be accompanied by more effective enforcement mechanisms.

**Key Words:** *Complementary alternative medicine; Infants; Children; Regulation; Anti-vaccine; Cancer*

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## INTRODUCTION

Complementary Alternative Medicine (CAM), often referred to as complementary and alternative medicine, encompasses a diverse range of healthcare practices, therapies, and treatments that fall outside the conventional medical mainstream. CAM approaches are used alongside or in conjunction with conventional medicine to promote health, alleviate symptoms, or address various health conditions. These practices are often based on holistic and natural principles, focusing on the mind-body connection, and may include therapies such as acupuncture, herbal medicine, chiropractic care, meditation, yoga, and dietary supplements.

CAM is distinct from conventional medicine in that it often relies on non-pharmacological and non-surgical interventions and emphasizes the body's innate ability to heal itself. While many people find CAM therapies beneficial for managing certain conditions or improving overall well-being, it's essential to approach these treatments with a critical eye and consult with healthcare professionals, as their safety and efficacy can vary widely. Additionally, some CAM practices lack robust scientific evidence to support their claims, making it important for individuals to make informed decisions about their healthcare choices.

### CHIROPRACTIC PEDIATRICS

Chiropractors who provide care to infants, children, and even expectant mothers have established professional associations like the International Chiropractic Pediatrics Association (ICPA). In my perspective, these associations seem to perpetuate the unsubstantiated

belief that infants and children should receive chiropractic care right from birth. They present themselves as experts in this domain; however, their primary function appears to be instilling parental concerns that the birthing process may harm their infants. They make baseless assertions that such experiences could lead to significant health issues later in life. Various marketing entities are prevalent, disseminating comprehensive scripts, supportive pamphlets, magazines, websites, and videos specifically designed to target the susceptible minds of parents. A cursory examination of pediatric chiropractic websites reveals a multitude of unfounded claims. The issue lies in the fact that regulatory bodies overseeing chiropractic practices often refrain from taking decisive actions against their members who breach established standards or policies. In 2013, a group of four chiropractic authors from Canada conducted a review on the topic of Vaccinations and Chiropractic.

In Ontario, there is a recurring pattern within the College of Chiropractors of Ontario (CCO), where complaints are often left unaddressed for extended periods. Even when these complaints are appealed to our Health Professions Appeal and Review Board (HPARB) and subsequently referred back to the CCO, it still takes several years for the CCO to provide a response.

One of the most glaring instances demonstrating the CCO's lack of decisive action dates back to the 1990s when a significant number of their members were engaged in anti-vaccine activities. It took the CCO an extended period to enact any substantial policies or standards to regulate this issue.

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## HAZARDS POSED BY BOTH LICENSED AND UNLICENSED CHARLATANS

In numerous regions worldwide, thousands of unlicensed individuals exploit children and their families. In developing countries, these individuals are often referred to as shamans, medicine men, or medicine women. However, I won't delve into this aspect. Instead, I will focus on a significant area of concern, particularly concerning children in Canada.

Children become vulnerable targets for several reasons. Either their parents allow them to receive treatment from these charlatans instead of seeking care from legitimate medical professionals, or licensed healthcare providers, who are supposed to adhere to evidence-based medicine, administer treatments without due regard for scientific principles.

I will now highlight a few tragic cases from Canada, a country with a system of "socialized medicine" where the practice of quackery unfortunately persists. Regrettably, little has changed over the past few decades. The situation is particularly distressing in Ontario, where the regulation of naturopathy, homeopathy, and traditional Chinese medicine has been authorized. The intention behind socialized medicine was to provide oversight for these Complementary Alternative Medicine (CAM) professions, but it appears that little progress has been made. The claims put forth by these "professionals" often lack a solid foundation in scientific evidence, and some of them can even pose significant risks to individuals' health.

### CAM TRAGEDIES

1. **Ravi devgan:** Close to twenty years ago, I received a message from a journalist based in Ontario. This reporter had come across a financially disadvantaged Mexican Mennonite family with twins facing significant neurological and mental health challenges. These desperate parents had sought help from a supposed physician, Ravi Devgan, who professed to possess the ability to treat their children. Regrettably, he exploited their vulnerability by administering hazardous injections of sheep fetuses and deceived them into parting with more than \$30,000.
2. **Ezekiel stephan:** This case has remained in the spotlight for six years. It commenced when a 19-month-old toddler from Alberta tragically succumbed to meningitis. In the past, many infants and toddlers in North America lost their lives to meningitis each year. What sets apart Ezekiel's 2012 passing as particularly noteworthy is the legal proceedings against his parents. His father, David Stephan, and mother, Collet, faced charges and were convicted in an Alberta Court in 2016 for failing to provide the necessities of life. Following years of legal disputes and appeals, the case ultimately reached Canada's Supreme Court in May 2018, where it was overturned on a technicality. Consequently, David and Collet are now slated for a retrial in Alberta. Throughout this protracted ordeal, numerous thought-provoking articles, extensive television coverage, and ethical and legal viewpoints from around the world have emerged. The process of bringing this case to trial took years, and the actual trial spanned

several weeks. Public sentiment, which was predominantly critical of the couple from the outset, appeared to be influenced by David Stephan's blogs, television appearances, and notably his Facebook pages, which largely served as a platform for deflecting blame onto others. To this day, he has not publicly acknowledged any responsibility on his or his wife's part in Ezekiel's tragic demise.

3. **Makayla sault:** An 11-year-old girl hailing from the Credit First Nation Reserve in Caledonia, Ontario, found herself ensnared by Brian Clement, a notorious quack based in Florida who operates the Hippocrates Health Institute in West Palm Beach. This case sparked a contentious dispute involving the McMaster University Pediatric Oncology Department, various social service agencies, and the First Nation's chief. Ultimately, the courts granted permission to discontinue chemotherapy for Makayla's leukemia, a treatment that had a high likelihood of achieving remission. This complex situation encompassed multiple indigenous girls grappling with treatable leukemia. Initially, the State of Florida had charged Clement with practicing medicine without a valid license, but the case was quietly dropped in March 2015. One perplexing aspect of Clement's involvement is the suspicion surrounding his distribution of illicit supplements, which were shipped to the Reserve and other health food stores in Ontario. Although these concerns were reported to Health Canada, there appeared to be limited tangible progress. Additionally, the Aboriginal band sponsored several of Clement's appearances, seemingly aimed at recruiting more patients and promoting his dubious practices.