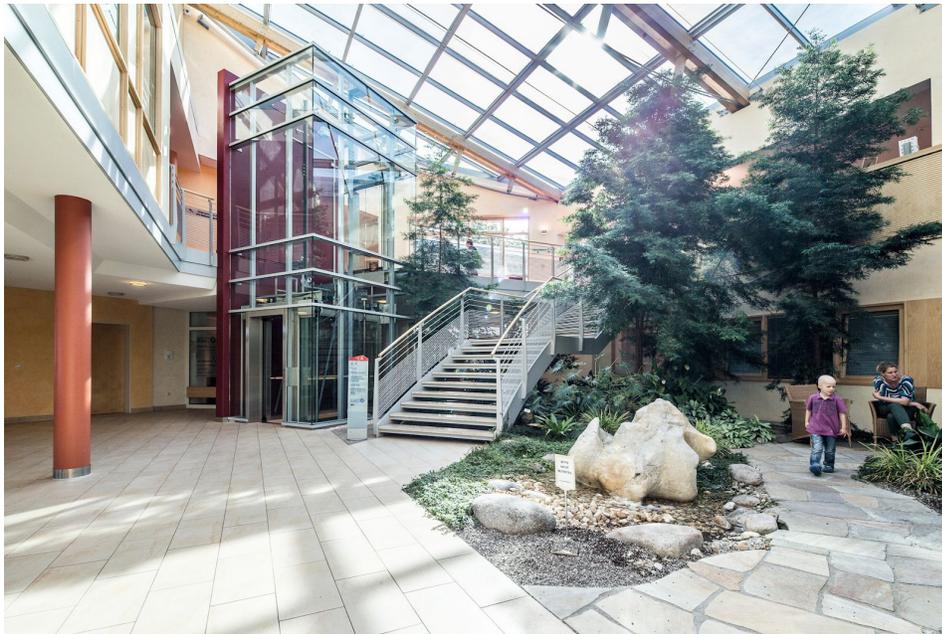


In Defense of European Integrative Hospitals

Mark Hancock MD, MPH, January 10, 2021

The publication in *The Guardian* by Philip Oltermann¹ today of the article attacking the integrative treatment of hospitalized patients in Germany is biased, closed-minded and uninformed. He attempts to make the case that because there exist (due to the will of the German people who have a strong support for integrative medicine) public hospitals whose physicians and nurses use integrative modalities, and that these modalities are delivered in the care of sometimes severely ill patients infected with Covid, and that some of these patients cannot directly indicate if they would prefer not to be treated with these modalities, therefore there is gross quackery going on foisted on unconsenting patients. Because of the implications of these statements in such a widely read news source it is important to go through each of these points carefully.



It is absolutely correct that Germany boasts multiple public hospitals practicing an integrative medicine going back over 100 years called Anthroposophic Medicine. Over 1000 scientific papers have been published on this system of medicine- which is practiced all over the world in over 60 countries.² That these facilities exist is a testament to the public support of integrative medicine in Germany. A nursing school, medical school and residency training system exist that teach both conventional medicine side by side with the

¹ "Ginger Root and Meteorite Dust: The Steiner 'Covid Cures' Offered in Germany," the Guardian, January 10, 2021, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jan/10/ginger-root-and-meteorite-dust-the-steiner-covid-cures-offered-in-germany>.

² David Martin, "100-Year Anniversary of Anthroposophic Medicine as an Integrative Medical System," *Complementary Medicine Research* 27, no. 6 (2020): 375–78, <https://doi.org/10.1159/000511668>.

integrative system of Anthroposophic Medicine (AM). These therapies are covered by insurance companies- because they work. In one case comparison was made between inpatient depression treatment conventionally versus in an Anthroposophic hospital. The integrative approach took longer and was more expensive in the short run as it integrated artistic modalities and other remedies to try to address the heart of the issue. However, these treatments are now covered in Europe because the patients treated with them had far less recurrence and readmissions for the same issue, saving thousands of dollars in the long run.³ Pediatric inpatient departments in AM hospitals has been found to treat a similar case mix of patients compared with conventional hospitals and do so efficiently.⁴ One personal communication between myself and the head of an eating disorders inpatient unit related that in the integrative treatment the children had 20% less recurrence.

³ Harald J. Hamre et al., "Health Costs in Patients Treated for Depression, in Patients with Depressive Symptoms Treated for Another Chronic Disorder, and in Non-Depressed Patients: A Two-Year Prospective Cohort Study in Anthroposophic Outpatient Settings," *The European Journal of Health Economics: HEPAC: Health Economics in Prevention and Care* 11, no. 1 (February 2010): 77–94, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10198-009-0203-0>.

⁴ Katharina Fetz et al., "Comparative Analysis of Resource Utilization in Integrative Anthroposophic and All German Pediatric Inpatient Departments," *BMC Health Services Research* 20, no. 1 (October 12, 2020): 939, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12913-020-05782-6>.

Anthroposophic medicine has decades of experience treating infectious diseases (including respiratory infections) often not finding it necessary to use antibiotics.

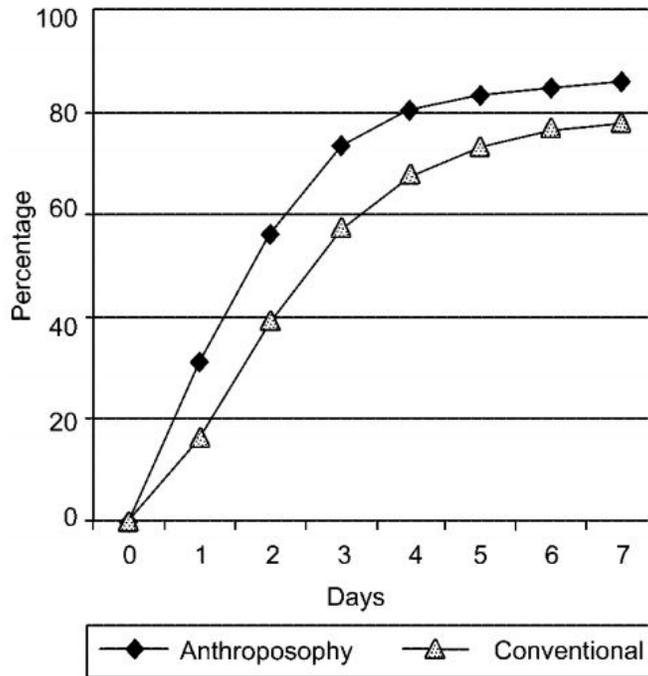


Fig. 2. First improvement, cumulative percentage. A-group: n = 715; C-group n = 301

A prospective study of over 1000 individuals with ear infection or upper respiratory infection showed that AM was superior, giving nearly twice the improvement in 24hours as conventional care. AM providers prescribed antibiotics 10% of the time, conventional 97%.⁵ One small study showed comparable results in a group of patients with bacterial pneumonia treated with only AM (no antibiotics) to general outcomes of patients with similar severity of pneumonia when treated with antibiotics.⁶ In another study 96% of parents were happy with the AM care for pneumonia and respiratory illness and reported learning skills they could use at home.⁷ This large study of 252 children with pediatric pneumonia, which may be viral or bacterial, treated in an integrative AM hospital found

⁵ Harald J. Hamre et al., "Anthroposophic vs. Conventional Therapy of Acute Respiratory and Ear Infections: A Prospective Outcomes Study," *Wiener Klinische Wochenschrift* 117, no. 7–8 (April 2005): 256–68, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00508-005-0344-9>.

⁶ Ulrich Geyer et al., "Inpatient Treatment of Community-Acquired Pneumonias with Integrative Medicine," *Evidence-Based Complementary and Alternative Medicine : ECAM* 2013 (2013), <https://doi.org/10.1155/2013/578274>.

⁷ Tido von Schoen-Angerer et al., "Acceptance, Satisfaction and Cost of an Integrative Anthroposophic Program for Pediatric Respiratory Diseases in a Swiss Teaching Hospital: An Implementation Report," *Complementary Therapies in Medicine* 40 (October 2018): 179–84, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ctim.2017.10.005>.

good outcomes though only 32% were given antibiotics with their care.⁸ Standard prescribing of antibiotics is 88-98%. Integrative care hospital systems were well prepared for Covid- another viral illness often attacking the lungs with initially no conventional treatment and currently very little evidence based treatments in the conventional realm. It is clear that addressing the human being as a whole can and does shift outcomes in infectious disease processes. It is reasonable to think that in Covid infection the same would be true.

Oltermann raises the ethical dilemma that patients are transported to these hospitals as they are part of the public sector and may be too sick to voice that they do not want these modalities. He does clarify that the staff did these therapies to augment other conventional care modalities (they were not replacing oxygen with a ginger compress). And they did when possible verbally consent the patient or their family about these care decisions. It is important to note that the modalities in questions are external herbal compresses and homeopathic remedies. Homeopathic remedies are not considered harmful by most conventional practitioners (unless replacing or delaying a conventional care modality). As a physician that has worked with patients in the intensive care unit, there are some interventions (like a heating pad) that we can use with little more than verbal consent or even gesture (such as putting out one's arm for a blood draw). These integrative modalities are not akin to a blood transfusion or surgery. Oltermann's attempt to label these innovative integrative hospitals as unethical carries no water.

Oltermann commits the logical fallacy of hasty generalization at the end of his article where he infers that the entirety of Anthroposophic medicine is anti-vaccination due to some supporters of AM marching "alongside anti-vaxxers". However, this is contraindicated by looking at statements from the leadership of AM: "In overcoming the COVID-19 pandemic, the vaccination issue is essential. It is to be recognized as an exceptional achievement that we have succeeded in developing an impressive variety of COVID-19 vaccines in a very short time."⁹ In this well balanced document the authors attempt to forge a path that both protects a country's population from the pandemic while preserving the personal autonomy of its peoples.

Oltermann then goes on to give voice to critics with longstanding biases- such as Edzard Ernst- who runs a skeptic's blog critiquing every form of integrative medicine. Giving voice to people with an axe to grind against an innovative medical movement, that is flourishing

⁸ Jan Vagedes et al., "Restrictive Antibiotic Use in Children Hospitalized for Pneumonia: A Retrospective Inpatient Study," *European Journal of Integrative Medicine* 34 (February 1, 2020): 101068, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eujim.2020.101068>.

⁹ Soldner, Georg and Martin, David, "Vaccination Issues Related to COVID-19," January 7, 2021, <https://www.anthromedics.org/PRA-0971-EN>.

(not dwindling), is an inflammatory journalistic technique that sells papers and gets clicks. It is not good journalism. In a time like ours, with the Covid-19 pandemic surging across the globe, it is time to look at the successes and insights of out of the box ways of approaching illness such as in Anthroposophic medicine.