Complementary medicines – Do they help diabetes and heart patients?

Monash University researchers are leading a study to investigate how patients use complementary and alternative medicines in conjunction with conventional medicine.

The project, known as CAMELOT (Complementary and Alternative Medicine, Economics, Lifestyle and Other Therapeutic approaches for chronic conditions) is funded by the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) and is in partnership with Diabetes Australia-Victoria, Heart Support Australia, and the Chronic Illness Alliance. The study’s second phase was launched this week and focuses on people with Type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease.

CAMELOT’s chief investigator, medical anthropologist Professor Lenore Manderson said the study team, which includes researchers from La Trobe University in Melbourne, is interested to know more about patterns of use of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) by people with diabetes and cardiovascular disease or CVD (including high blood pressure and high cholesterol).

“We have learned so far that few people use CAMs specifically for Type 2 diabetes or CVD, but they often use them in addition to conventional pharmaceutical therapies to improve general health and wellbeing. The research highlights a broad range of practices and therapies, used for general health and well being, and to help with other chronic conditions. People use CAM to various levels, some regularly and others intermittently or occasionally,” Professor Manderson said.

Professor Manderson said debates about the use of complementary or alternative medicines tend to simplify the complexity of consumer choices and behaviour.

“The initial work of the CAMELOT study suggests that the public are often wary of combining complementary medicines and prescribed pharmaceuticals, although they may or may not tell their doctor when and why they do combine them, there is a wide perception that doctors are anti-CAM.”

Complementary and alternative medicines sometimes referred to as holistic, integrative or natural therapies are used by an estimated 70 per cent of Australians. CAM therapies include vitamins, minerals and herbal supplements, and such practices as naturopathy, homeopathy, acupuncture, aromatherapy, reflexology, massage, chiropractic, meditation, Tai chi, yoga and spiritual healing.

“CAM products and therapies are used for all sorts of conditions. Some CAMs are used to assist the cardiovascular system or lower stress levels. Not all CAM therapies have proven effectiveness and there is little information about why people use CAMs or the benefits they believe they gain from doing so,” Professor Manderson said.

Victorian residents with these conditions who want to know more about the study can contact Jennifer Moral on 03 9903 4695 or for more information and to access the questionnaire go to www.camelot.monash.edu.au

To arrange an interview with Professor Manderson, contact Samantha Blair Media and Communications, Monash University on: + 61 3 9903 4841.