

Harvard Receives \$10 Million Donation to Study Alternative Medicine

Editorial Staff

Harvard Medical School has been named the recipient of a \$10 million gift from the Bernard Osher Foundation. The gift will be used to support the school's Division for Research and Education in Complementary and Integrative Medical Therapies, and to establish a new institute that will examine the safety, efficacy and cost-effectiveness of alternative forms of care.

"This extraordinary gift from the Osher Foundation will allow us to take a leadership role in building a scientific understanding of the opportunities and risks encountered by patients seeking complementary and alternative therapies," asserted Joseph B. Martin, dean of the medical school. "We need to evaluate scientifically the effectiveness of these techniques - to assess the current status of our knowledge and determine what we need to do to advance that knowledge."

The new institute will be named the Osher Institute for Research and Education in Complementary and Integrative Medical Therapies. Heading up the institute will be David Eisenberg, MD, an associate professor of medicine at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center who currently heads the school's complementary and integrative medical therapies division. Eisenberg's interest in complementary therapies dates back to 1979, when he became the first U.S. medical exchange student to the People's Republic of China. In the 1990s, he published two now-famous studies on "unconventional" forms of care, which showed that Americans made more office visits to (and spent more money on) alternative care practitioners than conventional medical services.

Upon hearing of the donation, Eisenberg praised the foundation for its "extraordinary generosity" and offered his vision of the future of health care. "My hope is that when five or 10 universities have sustainable infrastructure for research, education and responsible patient care in this area, we will forget the terms 'alternative' and 'complementary' altogether and simply provide the best available medicine, based on the best available information," he said.

The money will be used by the institute and the division for a variety of projects, including the hiring of basic science and clinical research directors; the establishment of pilot studies and grant programs on alternative forms of care such as acupuncture and herbal remedies; and the creation of educational programs and electronic databases. In addition, the school plans to use some of the money to set up a permanent, tenured professorship - the Bernard Osher Chair in Complementary and Integrative Medical Therapies.

The Osher Foundation was founded in 1977 by Bernard Osher, a Maine businessman who later relocated to northern California. Its mission, according to a Harvard press release, is to "improve the life of residents for the San Francisco Bay area and the state of Maine." The foundation recently established a similar integrative medicine center at the University of California, San Francisco.

