



**Alternative
Medicine? A History,**
by Roberta Bivins
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In 1990 and 1997, US consumers made more visits to alternative medical practitioners than to all primary care physicians. In every high street there are shops selling remedies from around the world. While the General Medical Council is hostile, attacking the trend as a “flight from science”, a report for the NHS in Scotland accepted that “all systems of medicine have their parts to play” in healthcare. As this scholarly yet readable history shows, this is by no means a new situation: “cross-cultural medicine” has always existed, part of a continuous exchange of knowledge from the Egyptians to the Greeks, from the Greeks to the Arabs, etc. “Ching’s Chinese Pills” were as popular in Regency Britain as Tiger Balm is today. But what is new is the idea of an “alternative” medicine, for the very word presupposes an “orthodox” medicine, one that only emerged in the western medical marketplace during the 19th century. By exploring how medical ideas have crossed geographical and cultural boundaries for the last three centuries, Bivins places this fraught and polarised debate into a fascinating historical context.

PD Smith