

Civilization magazine, June 2000

ATTITUDE WELLNESS

Swiss canton redefines "conservative," embraces alternative medicine

With his immaculate white lab coat, thick slicked-back silver hair, and massive gold watch, Holger Hanneman has all the bearing of a staid Swiss doctor. The German native occupies a suite two doors from the train station in Herisau, an hour from Zurich, and serves a clientele from as far away as Italy and England. But Hanneman is not licensed as a medical doctor; he is a *naturarzt*, or natural doctor. Using magnets as small as a quarter or as long as a baguette, he treats ailments ranging from stage fright and tennis elbow to bronchitis, hemorrhoids, and cancer.

Bizarre as it may seem, Hanneman's practice is fairly typical in Appenzell, a rural Swiss canton that has become a European center for alternative medicine. Though the canton has 81 conventionally trained doctors, it has 257 healers—who have descended on this locale from all over Switzerland, as well as from Austria, Germany, and various Asian nations. These *heilpraktikers* offer treatments including acupuncture, herbalism, traditional Chinese medicine, and various sorts of mind cure. This boom is the direct result of the local government's deregulation—or, more precisely, its nonregulation—of medicine. In all of Switzerland, no other canton takes anywhere near as liberal a view of *heilpraktikers*.

You might suppose that this tolerance of what many deem quackery reflects an anything-goes political culture, as is the case in, say, Amsterdam or Eugene, Oregon. But Appenzell is so conservative that it only fully enfranchised women in 1991. And the Swiss can be wildly erratic when it comes to regulations: Lawn mowing on Sundays is forbidden, while legalization is underway for the cultivation of massive marijuana stashes for personal consumption. Thus the policy is neither a political statement nor a national quirk. It is eloquent testimony to Switzerland's loose federal constitution, and it also has deep roots in Appenzell's rural history. 'Appenzell has no universities, so for a long time it had no hospitals and few doctors, explains Rolf Arnold of the cantons health office. "The landscape has a lot of lonely houses on hilltops, so people had to learn how to help themselves." Arnold lets them do so; his oversight of the healers is hardly oppressive. Besides, the few complaints he hears almost always concern payment issues.

For decades, all you needed to enter the healer business in Appenzell was the self-confidence to advertise your powers. Then, in 1986, the canton required *heilpraktikers* to pass a two-and-a-half-hour test covering basic anatomy, hygienic processes, over-the-counter medication, and the handling of epidemic diseases. (By way of comparison, getting a driver's license in Switzerland commonly requires applicants to pay for five hours of expensive instruction, answer a 100-question road-rules test, and take lengthy first-aid training courses.) It's a rare year when more than a handful of the would-be healers fail.

Heilpraktiker David Snoad, a London Cockney by origin who took the test in 1996, recalls being surprised that candidates could bring unlimited reference materials into the exam. "Mr. Arnold told me, 'We can't expect you to have everything in your head,'" remembers Snoad. Today, he has a thriving practice in bioresonant and radiolic therapy—which he learned through a German videotape course. —**Marc Spiegler**