When her son was diagnosed with autism and her husband, a nonsmoker, developed deadly lung cancer, Suzanne Bartlett was troubled with questions that her medical training couldn’t answer.

Like many people, she began to wonder about the links between environment and disease, and whether toxins in our food, water, and air contribute to the increase in illnesses like autism and cancer. That curiosity eventually led her to study with a famous pioneer in the field of integrative medicine.

This past January, Bartlett, 96MD, became the first Iowa physician to complete a fellowship at the University of Arizona Center of Integrative Medicine, founded and directed by Harvard-trained doctor Andrew Weil. The institute aims to train “a new generation of doctors” who use both conventional and alternative approaches—and a holistic focus on mind, body, and spirit—to treat and prevent ill-health.

“By 2017, the U.S. is expected to spend $4.3 trillion on health care, but what we’re spending our money on isn’t helping us live longer. It’s like putting a Band-Aid on the problem,” says Bartlett. “Rather than simply treating symptoms, we need to teach people to adopt healthier lifestyles.”

Over two years, Bartlett completed her fellowship through 1,000 hours of classes online and in Tucson, learning about nutrition, herbal supplements, alternative and complementary treatments such as acupuncture, and mind-body approaches like yoga and meditation. As a doctor, she appreciated the center’s emphasis on science, research, and evidence-based information.

Now working at Mercy Hospital’s Integrative Medicine Center in Cedar Rapids, Bartlett sees patients individually—spending up to an hour with them—or in groups and at public workshops. She writes a handful of prescriptions a week compared to hundreds in her previous work as a physician and OB/GYN, and she’s as likely to refer a patient to a mindfulness-based stress reduction class as to a cardiologist.

She practices what she preaches, with regular yoga sessions, a healthy diet, and daily supplements of fish oil and vitamin D. She also taught her son, John, breathing practices that helped calm him down enough to get braces. Previously, he’d been so upset during dental visits that he’d had to undergo general anesthetic for basic teeth cleaning.

Alternative medicine has come a long way since Weil first started presenting at medical conventions about 20 years ago. Back then, most of the audience members would walk out. Now, doctors, patients, and health insurance companies are much more accepting. They realize that, as Bartlett says, “There’s a time and a place for both conventional and alternative medicine.”—TINA OWEN