

A Patients' Perspective on Integrative Oncology: Getting Past the "War," Living With and Beyond Cancer

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No one is ever prepared to hear the words “you have cancer” and yet every day in America nearly 5000 people do (1). In that brief moment, and for some for years ahead, you become a patient who is treated for their disease rather than the individual you were before you walked into the office. I know, as I heard those words over 7 years ago when I was diagnosed with a metastatic neuroendocrine tumor of the pancreas. While I had extensive disease, my oncologist suggested watchful waiting for 3 months and, understanding how hard that could be on a patient, recommended that I have a consult with an integrative oncologist so I could be actively engaged in some form of treatment that she would likely discontinue when we decided on the appropriate treatment.

My appointment with my integrative oncologist was different than other medical appointments I had in the past. During my initial consult, my cancer was not mentioned. Through the course of the hour, I discovered that integrative oncology is about understanding the whole body. I learned ways to visualize a place hostile to cancer—the weeds in your body that are growing and crowding out healthy cells—and at the same time create a place where the healthy cells in my immune system could flourish and do their best work. These actions supported my health and subsequent treatment. I learned the importance of a healthy diet, which is not as simple as it sounds, and how regular exercise and being physically active could improve the quality and perhaps the length of life. And, possibly most importantly, I learned the value of community and the importance of making sure that I was not holding on to stress or feeling isolated and alone.

I also learned about the growing body of evidence-based research on integrative oncology, and, as a patient, it was important for me to understand which treatments or suggestions had evidence-backed research so that I could separate them from those that had not been properly or fully studied.

My journey into integrative oncology helped me in many ways; first in finding peace with my diagnosis; second removing many stress points from my life; and third by helping me manage my fatigue after my conventional treatment. Integrative Oncology has helped me live with a cancer that cannot be cured, but can be treated as a chronic disease. After watching me through my journey with integrative oncology, my oncologist now routinely ask patients if they are interested in integrative

oncology and does not discontinue the practice once conventional treatments start.

Inevitably, every cancer patient at some point will have a well-meaning friend send them an article on the latest cancer cure—an herb, supplement, or new device, or treatments that western medicine does not want you to know about. After forwarding several of these to my integrative oncologist and asking him for his opinion, he shared with me the Integrative Oncology Guidelines published by the Society for Integrative Oncology (SIO) (2). Soon thereafter, he asked me join him on the board of the SIO where I served from 2009–2013.

The guidelines helped me put into perspective the best supportive evidence for complementary care and the importance of multidisciplinary healthcare teams. The guidelines gave me a framework on how to evaluate information not presented in the guidelines. While those in the medical field understand the use of guidelines, and actively seek them out, patient populations tend to seek more patient friendly information. It is no wonder that Guide for Credible Internet Information (3) is one of the most requested articles on the SIO website, as it helps patients better understand how to evaluate the information that is on the internet or that they may hear from others.

I have devoted a great deal of time to the field of integrative oncology, as I have a belief that adding complementary therapies can greatly increase one's quality of life, and perhaps length of life. It is my hope that this JNCI Monograph enables medical practitioners and patients to better understand the role that integrative oncology can play in the treatment of the whole person, not just the patient's disease.

References

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