Alternative treatments for breast cancer

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In this issue, J McLay et al. show that many UK breast cancer patients use herbal, mineral or vitamin supplements to enhance their well being or boost their immune system [1]. Who would blame them? Faced with a serious diagnosis, most of us would probably ‘leave no stone unturned’.

In their search for advice on alternative medicine, patients are spoilt for choice. There are millions of websites, hundreds of books and dozens of organisations that promote treatments associated with big claims. Closer inspection usually shows that these claims are unfounded if not irresponsible. But desperate patients are in no good position to differentiate between the bogus claims and the few treatments which might actually convey some benefit. It is therefore all the more depressing to see that even apparently respectable organisations promote useless modalities behind a smokescreen of politically correct platitudes about holistic, patient-centred healthcare [2]. One of the most striking phenomena about alternative medicine is the amount of misinformation that misleads even educated people to do the silliest things.

Giving up conventional medicine in favour of alternative treatments, tops the list of fatefully wrong decisions. Whenever this has hastened the death of a famous individual, like recently Steve Jobs, the world press briefly takes notice only to revert to ‘business as usual’ a few days later. And ‘business as usual’ means all too often the promotion of quackery to desperate patients.

Thankfully, most cancer patients do not abandon conventional oncology but use alternative treatments as an adjunct

to it. This seems far more prudent, but we should nevertheless ask ourselves: does it generate more good than harm?

To answer this important question, we have to evaluate each of the alternative treatments on offer on its own merits. As there are virtually hundreds of them with new ones emerging almost on a weekly basis, this is not an easy task. Generally speaking, the evidence for alternative treatments is less than convincing [3].

McLay et al. demonstrate that herbal, mineral or vitamin supplements are particularly popular with cancer patients [1]. There is reasonably sound evidence that such supplements do not improve the health or well-being of patients (e.g. [4, 5]). Other alternative options are equally disappointing (e.g. [6]). More positive evidence exists mainly for those interventions that lead to a relaxation response and thus may improve anxiety, stress, mood, fatigue or other symptoms of cancer patients [3].

But why not, if it pleases the patient? Do we really need evidence for everything? One can easily sympathise with this liberal and presently popular point of view. Yet we must not forget that ineffective treatments raise false hopes and cost money which could be used for effective therapies. Crucially we should also ask about their direct risks. Lay people have been told for so long that “natural” equals harmless, that most seem to believe it. McLay et al. rightly point out that supplements can interact with prescribed drugs, and herbal remedies can have oestrogenic activity. Both phenomena can cause serious harm to cancer patients.

Vis a vis the high prevalence of usage of alternative treatments by cancer patients [1], ethical healthcare professionals can only try to stem the tide of misinformation. First we should emphasise that alternative cancer cures do not and will never exist. Second, we must tell those patients who insist on complementary therapies which treatments demonstrably generate more good than harm for alleviating

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their symptoms. These are the treatments we can recommend as an adjunct to conventional care. The plethora of therapies that do not fulfil this essential criterion have to be classified as bogus, and we must warn our patients from using them.

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