

Complementary cancer medication

Victor Grech

Complementary cancer therapy such as herbal products have never been proven to be of efficacy, at least not by the evidence-based standards of today's medical care. Moreover, such therapies may, in many ways, interact negatively with conventional cancer treatment. Indeed, cancer patients should inform their health care providers if they are taking herbal products because some of these compounds may actually reduce the efficacy of conventional and standard medications, treatments of proven effectiveness in extensive and expensive clinical trials. These points were recently highlighted at an international level by Professor Maria João Cardoso, Head Breast Surgeon at the Breast Unit of the Champalimaud Cancer Center in Lisbon, at the Advanced Breast Cancer Fifth International Consensus Conference.

For example, garlic, ginger and ginkgo pills may delay wound healing. Prof Cardoso stressed that for these reasons, doctors need to be proactive and ask their patients whether they are contemporaneously taking any complimentary therapies along with their prescribed medications, especially in cancers that had spread to the skin. This is because herbal therapies and creams may actively interfere with hormone therapy or chemotherapy and may also interfere with blood clotting, such that wounds take longer to heal and may do so with more scarring. Culprits include green chiretta, feverfew, garlic, ginkgo, ginseng, hawthorn, horse chestnut and turmeric. Furthermore, grapefruit and orange, for example, are known to affect enzymes which break down cancer drugs.

On the other hand, there are complementary therapies that may help to reduce treatment symptoms such as pain and fatigue. These include relaxation, talking therapies, meditation, visualisation, acupuncture, aromatherapy, reflexology, music therapy, art therapy, massage, yoga, mindfulness, reiki and acupuncture. These may all have a positive impact on patients' quality of life.

Primum non nocere.

Cover Picture:

'View of Barrakka Gardens at Night'

Watercolours

By Christian Camilleri

Christian Camilleri is an anaesthesia trainee who began painting in childhood. His preferred medium and subject consist of watercolour figures, portraits and battle scenes. He derives inspiration from both Baroque and early 20th Century sources.

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