Evidence-based complementary/alternative medicine for supportive cancer care

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Most cancer patients are tempted to try some form of complementary/alternative medicine (CAM). According to a recent survey, only 16% of cancer patients from Pakistan do not use some form of CAM. A larger study from California suggested CAM use to be 75% in cancer patients, a figure which seems to agree well with other US survey data.

Systematic literature searches were carried out in electronic databases until 2007. Included were data from randomized controlled trials and systematic reviews of randomized controlled trials.

The evidence indicates that relaxation therapy aromatherapy and massage are helpful in improving quality of life and well-being of cancer patients. Several other treatments such as, homeopathy and reflexology are associated with evidence suggesting ineffectiveness. The evidence that acupuncture alleviates chemotherapy-induced nausea has become less convincing with the addition of recent evidence.

One could question whether clinical trials are really required if terminal cancer patients wish to have CAM. On the other hand, clinical trials are desirable to generate better quality of care in the future. Weighing the arguments for or against clinical studies, it was recently concluded that “an absence of rigorous science will critically hinder progress” [1]. In conclusion, CAM for palliative cancer care is a very actively researched area. Some treatments are now supported by sound or at least encouraging evidence but more research is undoubtedly required.

Reference