Complementary Therapies for Cancer: what works, what doesn't—and how to tell the difference

Professor Shaun Holt. Published by Craig Potton Publishing, July 2010.

This book provides an evidence-based overview of the use of complementary therapies for cancer. It has been written for anyone with cancer and for health care professionals who care for such patients.

In some countries such as the United States, there are more visits to complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) practitioners than there are to primary health care doctors.

Whether we like it or not, our patients are using CAM and other natural therapies, and health care practitioners need to understand the basic principles of these therapies and know which have a solid scientific basis and can be recommended.

This is particularly the case for patients with cancer, half of whom will use CAM therapies and almost all of the remainder will look at using them and seek information, often from their doctor.

With respect to health care professionals, the utility of the book is neatly captured in the powerful forward written by Dr Belinda Scott who says....“no patient should waste their valuable energy, time or money on treatments that have not been scientifically proven…it matters to me that Shaun referred to sound scientific studies when recommending or dismissing a therapy.”

In addition, the book is endorsed by the world’s leading expert on CAM therapies and the co-author of Trick or Treatment, Professor Edzard Ernst, who says in the cover notes…”this book is a much-needed assistance for vulnerable and often desperate people. It should be made available for all cancer patients who feel tempted to try some form of complementary medicine.”

The introductory chapters provide an overview of the use of CAM by people with cancer. Remarkably, a quarter of those who use CAM will use 7 or more therapies. On reflection this makes sense, given the attitude of many patients who are faced with a potentially fatal diagnosis and are determined to leave “no stone unturned” in their quest to maximise their chances of survival and maintain as high a quality of life as is possible. It is emphasised that none of the therapies discussed will cure cancer, but many can be effective in reducing symptoms and/or increasing quality of life.

Around 40 of the commonest CAM therapies that are used by people with cancer are discussed, with around half being recommended and the remainder advised against. For each therapy, the history of the treatment and the practicalities of receiving it are discussed, along with a summary of the key research findings and a graded recommendation from “highly recommended” to “definitely avoid.”
Some of the research findings are surprisingly robust, for example, a study of over 600 participants with chemotherapy-induced nausea not only demonstrated clear benefits of ginger but also determined a dose-response relationship.

There are numerous fascinating facts; for example, shark cartilage is promoted as a cancer cure on the basis that sharks do not get cancer, whereas the reality is that over 40 types of cancer have been described in sharks.

_Complementary Therapies for Cancer_ is an educational and enjoyable read and is highly recommended to all health care professionals who care for patients with cancer.

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