

You and your doctor

As we shall see in later chapters, the patient who is passive in the face of cancer and treatment, who assigns responsibility to the doctor for achieving health and recovery is less likely to survive than the person who participates in the recovery programme. It will help patients achieve some control if they understand the subtleties of some of the language the doctor may use in discussing cancer treatments.

The language of cancer

Doctors use a variety of words to measure success, and it is important to understand what is meant by the terms that doctors commonly use.

Measures of success

Response rate	This indicates the number of patients for whom the cancer shrank more than 50% after treatment. But tumours can quickly return. This measure is meaningless for patients. There is no connection at all between response rate and survival.
1-3-5-10 year survival rate	This means what it says. That percent of the patients who were treated have survived for the period indicated. Short and medium term survival rates are highly suspect as they are skewed by improvements in diagnosis. If cancers are found earlier the survival rates will apparently go up without any actual improvement in treatment.
Disease-free survival	How long the patient survives without any signs of the tumour. Length of life may not be increased in any way even with increased disease free survival.
Regression/Partial remission	The tumour has grown smaller.
Complete remission	Complete disappearance of cancer tumours for a significant period. This sounds less permanent than a cure and usually is.
Cure	Doctors rarely use this word. If a doctor uses this word ask him/her what he/she means by it. He or she may mean no more than five year survival.

Treatment options

If cancer has been diagnosed, you will need to talk to your doctor very carefully about treatment options. You have a choice between following orthodox treatments alone, alternative treatments alone or some combination of the two. Orthodox treatments are surgery, radiation, chemotherapy and others: immunotherapy, anti-angiogenesis therapy, heat therapy and photodynamic therapy. Orthodox treatments are aimed at killing the tumour or cancer in the body. Alternative therapies, on the other hand, include a wide range of approaches which, generally speaking, are not aimed at the tumour specifically but at healing the whole body (the tumour itself is seen as a symptom not the disease). Alternative approaches include diets, supplements and other therapies which will be discussed later.

For any cancer that has metastasised and where orthodox treatments offer a poor prognosis, alternative treatments may be preferred as they are usually not invasive or damaging in the orthodox treatments tend to be. Your doctor may well be dismissive of the alternative approach but bear in mind this is a professional prejudice, not based on rigorous scientific evaluation. There is a fundamental ideological dispute between doctors, who focus on the tumour to the exclusion of all else, and complementary health practitioners, who focus on the terrain in which the tumour is growing, and aspects of the body's bio-chemistry that may be contributing to the further development of the cancer.

You need to investigate properly the full range of treatments available to you - both orthodox and complementary.

Counselling and consultation

Many cancer patients have expressed disbelief and anger at the poor quality of the medical counselling they are provided with. It is not uncommon for doctors virtually to order patients to undergo certain procedures. Like the rest of us, doctors aren't perfect and most of them will have had little or no training in counselling. Do not allow yourself to be coerced into making a decision about which you have reservations; if you need a week to decide, take a week. Sometimes a doctor may say something odd such as 'That's not in the protocol.' If the word protocol comes up in conversation then be warned that you may unwittingly be part of a clinical trial. Do clarify this with the doctor.

On the other hand many doctors, particularly family doctors, are caring and sympathetic towards their patients and fully appreciate the emotional turmoil that a diagnosis of cancer brings. Talk through your concerns as much as you need to. Make sure that when you finally decide on your course of action it is one that you feel is the most sensible. Both your GP and the specialist cancer unit should be able to tell you about the various support services – emotional and practical – that are available

Here are some questions you may wish to ask a doctor

Questions about the cancer

- Where exactly is the cancer? Please draw a diagram.
- What stage is it?
- Is it aggressive or slow-growing?
- What symptoms can I expect if the cancer progresses?
- What further investigations do you need to undertake? What risks are attached to these?

Questions about prognosis

- 1 What percentage of people with my condition can expect to live another five years? ten years? With treatment? Without treatment?
- 2 What separates those who live from those who don't?

Questions about treatment

- 1 What are the treatment options?
- 2 Where will the treatment be done?
- 3 Can I insist that any surgery will be done by a specialist cancer surgeon?
- 4 Are there any other options about where the treatment is done and who does it?
- 5 Are the treatments being offered to obtain a cure, a remission or a response?
- 6 Can I have copies of any studies into the value of the treatment being proposed?
- 7 Am I part of a clinical trial if I take this treatment?

Questions about side-effects

- 1 What side-effects am I likely to suffer from each of the treatment options?
- 2 What are the worst possible side-effects of each treatment?
- 3 What permanent disability may occur as a result of each treatment?
- 4 What support/non-medical help can I have during and after the treatment?

Questions about other opinions

- 1 I want a second opinion. Can I have copies of all my medical tests and x-rays?
- 2 I wish to speak to a specialist oncologist about my case – who can I see? (This is if you are not already seeing one.)

Questions about alternative or complementary treatments

You should be able to talk to your doctor about whatever orthodox and complementary/alternative treatments you are interested in to find out what help he or she can provide. Can your doctor usefully prescribe vitamins, iscador, injections of zinc and magnesium ascorbates and so on. If you find your doctor resistant to talking about things you wish to talk about, then you should consider getting a second opinion - or even, if necessary, change doctors.