

Introduction

The term 'alternative treatments' covers a wide range of approaches and ideas. Most, but not all, of these therapies take as a central concept the idea that cancer is a disease of the whole body and that the tumour is simply a symptom. Once the cause is cleared up the symptom will disappear of its own accord. Since they tend to concentrate on the whole body, they are referred to as 'holistic' (or sometimes 'wholistic')

There can be little doubt that people have been cured, or had their life extended, or had the quality of their lives improved using many, if not all, of these methods either on their own or in combination with each other. What is hotly debated is whether or not any of these methods can claim to *consistently* cure cancer. Certainly, many of these approaches do claim consistency. However, since this consistency is absent from mainstream methods, a lack of proof of consistency is not a fatal criticism.

Few of these approaches have been clinically tested to any great extent but the anecdotal evidence that supports them is often persuasive - as indeed is the reasoning that accompanies them. Many have been put forward by doctors and by bio-chemists. Sometimes it seems that the war of medical philosophies is really a battle between specialists of different scientific disciplines supported or attacked by the commercial interests that have a financial stake in the outcomes. There is for example growing anecdotal evidence that colloidal silver, a substance that is cheap and easy to make at home using inexpensive equipment, may be a good defense, even a cure for both cancer and AIDS, (viruses in petri dishes are killed by contact with high doses of silver 1,000 ppm) but since it is unpatentable it will find no friends among the scientists and spokesmen representing the pharmaceutical industry.

There is also the fact that herbal approaches are an affront to the scientist who seeks to reduce the focus of attention to a single 'active ingredient' - but as we have already pointed out, there is no good reason for believing that life is so simple. The fact that a single drop of pure nicotine on the skin would cause death within a few seconds should give the lie to that belief. Clearly there is some benefit for smokers to get their nicotine fix in a herbal way. Also, as we have noticed, scientists themselves are giving chemotherapy in combinations and finding this approach to be slightly more effective. Cells take longer to resist the drugs.

So, there is, as I argue in the following pages, much to be said for following the alternative treatments. These therapies may be used as a complementary therapy alongside an orthodox therapy, equally they can be used as an alternative replacing the orthodox prescribed course of treatment.

Some people are nevertheless affronted by anything that does not have the approval of the scientific establishment or medical authorities. Their argument is that until they are proven to be beneficial we should avoid them. My answer to them is that there is in fact no such thing as absolute knowledge of anything. Even drugs that are proved to be effective and/or safe are from time to time forced off the market because they are either not effective or, more commonly, not safe.

I prefer to approach the decision problem from another direction. My approach is to examine any suggested therapy and ask the following questions:

1. Is the reasoning sensible? Is the claim believable?
2. Am I making someone rich? (I accept that everyone has to make a living)

3. Is the financial impact huge or within normal limits?
4. Is the treatment easily doable?
5. Is the treatment safe?
6. How quickly will I see any benefits?

In summary, I conduct a risk-benefit analysis. My acceptance of any therapy is always provisional and I accept that I am my own guinea pig. I am responsible for my own decisions. This is actually a very liberating position to take: to be in charge of one's own treatment. Not everyone likes that; they want the appearance of certainty. Each to his or her own. Philosophical differences of this kind are often rooted in psychological differences. And as I argue elsewhere, we must respect these differences and allow people to make different decisions from those we would make for ourselves.

For me, however, the alternative route is rich in possibility and it is the route I would choose for myself. ie is it cheap, convenient