

'Do You Treat Cancer?': An Open Letter to a Cancer Patient


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Abstract

The following article is an adapted version of a letter written by the author to one of many patients who have asked, 'Do you treat cancer?'. It is shared in the hope that it helps practitioners to answer this loaded question, and to mature the perspective of the Chinese medicine community on treating cancer and other serious diseases.

Keywords

Chinese medicine, acupuncture, herbal medicine, cancer, oncology

 As practitioners of an alternative approach to medicine, sooner or later we are all asked the question: 'Can you treat cancer?' Because the issues around cancer's development in the body are complex, the answer to this question is rarely a simple yes or no. Due to my background, I have been faced with this question on a monthly basis for over 25 years. In 1993, Bill Moyers' *Healing and the Mind* aired on PBS (Public Broadcasting Service) and was viewed by over six million people. As someone involved in the episode featuring Chinese medicine - and because I was based in Beijing - I began to receive letters and faxes from people seeking treatment in China within weeks of its airing. Each letter and fax revealed a person desperate to be told that the old doctors of Chinese medicine had a cure for something that Western medicine did not. They hoped that there were herbs with tumour-killing properties and acupuncture points that would rid the body of cancer. How could these queries be answered honestly, ethically and realistically? I had certainly seen enough apparent 'miracles' to know Chinese medicine can be effective in treating patients with cancer. But I had also seen patients decline and die despite the old doctors' best

efforts. What were the commonalities for those whose treatments were successful? What factors did the failures share? How could promises be made to someone whose letter says, 'You are our last hope!'?

I quickly developed a series of stock answers that addressed specific points and offered questions to consider, such as: 'Chinese medicine does not treat cancer, but treats the individual who has cancer'; 'Do you wish to risk your final days away from friends and family, living in a strange hotel room in a country where you do not speak the language, that is difficult to navigate and extremely polluted?'; 'Is your health already so challenged by the disease and failed Western medical treatments that realistically there is no medicine that can help you now?'. When we returned to the United States in 2014 to practise there, we had an immediate base of cancer patients in all phases of the disease. Again, I found myself creating template letters to answer questions from the local population. I found my inbox inundated with articles and reports of alternative treatments sent by patients asking for my opinion. Recently, I personalised an answer for a patient whom I had seen for other problems several years

previously and who was now contacting me about his cancer diagnosis. I have decided to share a slightly edited version of the letter here in the hope it may help other practitioners answer the question, 'Do you treat cancer?'

Dear ...,

Thank you for sharing your news, which must be hard right now. Before answering what Chinese medicine can do for cancer, I would like to share my opinion on cancer more generally. Cancer is an opportunistic disease, not a specific bacterium or virus. It must be given an opportunity or catalyst to begin its cycle of existence and continue to grow. This can come from external circumstances, internal causes, or (usually) a mix of both in some percentage or other. The more dramatic external reasons can come from radioactive exposure, growing up next to a chemical factory or living with toxic items. In cases of sudden and extreme exposure, it can be very quick from the time of appearance to growth and conclusion.

Cancer can also develop due to internal reasons, poor health and poor lifestyle decisions that lead to a breakdown of our physiological systems, which provide the opportunity for it to arise. I personally tend to describe the development of cancer in terms of refuse collecting in a spot in the body - just like the compost pile outside in our yard. If compost does not get any life going inside it, it just sits there, inert. This would be like a benign tumour, cyst or other growth. But should this compost build vitality and heat (just what we want in our compost pile but not in any refuse in our body), then this living refuse area within us becomes cancerous. It develops a life of its own, and once fully established, is hard to extinguish without proper strategy and treatment.

Most people today are exposed to a low to moderate amount of the external causes of cancer, but also have low to moderate health due to current lifestyle habits and diet, leading to a slow but steady accumulation of 'refuse' within the body. Over time, the two in concert generate both more refuse and the life within it, which leads to a rampant increase in cancer as people pass from their 40s to their 50s. The challenge in terms of understanding why this patient group becomes sick is that there is usually no single identifiable causal event - the influences involved took time to create the environment for cancer to appear. Internally, women face a number of factors in the modern world which damage their hormonal balance and create opportunistic environments for the most common cancer they face: breast cancer. In men, prostate and colorectal cancers dominate, which are given the opportunity to arise due to carrying too much abdominal weight (that literally squishes the flow through their intestines and prostate). With poor flow, refuse becomes trapped and easily festers

into cancer. In addition, the modern patient faces the very real issue of Western medications, which may address a potentially life-threatening situation in the short term, but create a high probability of cancer or other problems twenty years later due to their side effects.

In your particular case, we certainly have the sequelae of Western medical treatments, and we might make an argument that a lifetime of exposure to paints, paint fumes, and all that comes with being an artist may also be a factor. But we have an additional factor which cannot be overlooked. These past four years have been very difficult for you emotionally. The events you have experienced, and are still dealing with, have had a major impact upon you. In Chinese medicine, the greatest reason for disease to set in, worsen or not respond to treatment, is the emotions. Emotions may not be able to directly give us - or cure - disease, but they create the environment for one or the other. This is an analogy only, but imagine what it would be like to taste the qi and blood of someone who was suddenly frightened or chronically depressed or overly angry or happy; they would all taste different. Our emotions change the 'flavour' of our qi and blood. Some flavours lead to disease in the body, others are inhospitable to disease.

This is the area I want us to really look at in your case. It has been a very hard time for you emotionally, and this has dragged on for a long time. This is affecting your qi and blood, whether you are willing to acknowledge it or not. No matter what treatment path you choose to take or forgo, none will be effective if you do not address this as your primary treatment objective. The issues you face are not going away soon, thus you must find ways to come to terms with them, seek therapy for them and make dramatic changes in your life - whatever it takes to change both their presence in your life and the emotional toll they are taking on your internal health. I cannot stress enough that while simply addressing the emotional component of your health will not solve the diagnosis you have now, doing so is the only way that any other treatment you undertake stands a good chance of being successful (and so that no new diseases of this nature come at you down the road).

As to your current diagnosis: in North Carolina (USA), Chinese medicine practitioners are not primary care practitioners and thus cannot suggest or recommend a specific course of cancer treatment. I can, however, share with you my thoughts on what I personally would do with such a diagnosis, for your consideration. You have been diagnosed with in situ urothelial carcinoma in the prostate. In situ is the best kind of cancer to have, particularly in an area you have already had cancer and cancer treatment. It might have been there for 20 years and could stay there for another 20 years if no biopsy had been performed. Many people have such cancers and never know; they live their

lives and then pass on for other reasons. While statistics are hard to come by, there is growing data on the number of people who were never diagnosed with cancer but had it somewhere in the body - and it was not the cause of their death. Thus, rushing to treat something aggressively which may not be a threat at your age is not to be done without careful thought.

For in situ cancer patients, I use an analogy about asbestos. It was originally considered a wonder insulator and was used widely until it was discovered to be hazardous. Immediately it was pulled out and removed. When that happened, asbestos-related illnesses skyrocketed as the ripping out and removing of it was much more dangerous than its mere presence. Today, it tends to be wrapped up and not touched at all as the safest method. In the same way, poking at an in situ cancer to remove it may be worse than careful monitoring it while using a slow treatment method that puts the body in the best place to resolve it naturally. Bees only sting us if we poke the nest, so there really has to be a good reason to intentionally intervene with an in situ cancer.

Active bladder cancer, however, is another matter to consider. Given your previous cancer history, the oncologists are anxious to do biopsies of your bladder to see if there is additional cancer beyond what they have currently found in situ. There are a few cancers which are quite hard to get to, require radical procedures and traditionally have poor treatment outcomes. Bladder cancer is one of them. How aggressively to go after it with Western medicine really depends on the balance between our age and desire to live versus the chance of success while undergoing treatment that causes a terrible quality of life. No one wants to die, and no one wants a terrible quality of life. But as the Western medical treatments for bladder cancer have low success rates, to commit to that quality of life on the way to dying is not a decision to be made lightly. Given the risks involved in treating bladder cancer aggressively or conservatively, there is no right choice, just the right choice for you. It is a decision which would be different for each of us and should be made individually as well as with our family or support network.

You have asked about using Chinese medicine for your cancer. We are not strangers to helping patients with whichever decisions they make in terms of treating their cancer. We have patients whom we help with side-effects so they do better than their cohorts through treatment and recovery; we have patients who come to us because they

were either too late to undergo Western medical treatment or their bodies could no longer tolerate the medications; we also have patients who, either from watching a family member undergo treatment, or because of a past cancer battle of their own, simply refuse to undergo the orthodox route offered to them. We are happy to help you with whatever decision you reach, once you have consulted with your family, friends and oncologist.

You have also asked what would seeing us for cancer treatment look like? If the bladder biopsy returns negative, and you have made your decision on how to handle the in situ cancer, then aside from focusing on shifting your emotional state as the principal strategy, treatment would involve ongoing herbal medicine, lifestyle changes such as improving sleep habits, improving digestive function, exercise and breathing practices, as well as physical treatment with acupuncture and bodywork. If the cancer in the bladder returns positive, then you must work out what you want, and we move from there. Herbal formulas will be key, along with more actively focused physical treatments that, while not painful, need to be strong enough to shift

the body towards health. Our focus is not on treating cancer but on putting you in the best place possible for your body to recognise and address the cancer itself. There are, however, many other alternatives besides Chinese medicine.

From doctors in Germany who are pushing the frontiers of science, to diet and lifestyle retreat centres in Mexico and elsewhere that subscribe to a specific philosophy of extreme doses of certain vitamins or other methods to shift the PH of the blood, boost the immunity and cleanse impurities. Everyone has an opinion on what is best to treat cancer, which are often at odds with each other.

I do urge caution, should you choose to spend time online reading about cancer treatment alternatives. I know very little of these outside the realm of Chinese medicine, except that all of them boast success stories and anecdotal miracles. I, however, only see the failures of these alternative treatments as we have seen many 'cancer treatment refugees' over the years. I recognise my opinion may be more jaded and cynical than it should be, as only those 'refugees' who did not get better come to us as a final, last ditch effort. But it is a reality that the medical world, Western and alternative, has many a predatory clinic that feeds on desperation and panders to hope, to their great profit. Too many patients have bankrupted themselves only to return home sicker, or spend their final months in a

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foreign country away from family and friends before dying there penniless. Any decision you make should be made with a critical eye and not naive excitement.

As an assistant to some great Chinese medicine practitioners while in China and in my own practice, I have personally been a part of the lives and treatments of many cancer patients for over 25 years. Some of them did remarkably well despite having been told there was no hope; others we failed and they passed on - albeit perhaps with more dignity and quality of life than if they had been failed by orthodox treatment. Given my experience and exposure to successes and failures in China, I have full confidence that I have the skill to do the best I can, that I am honest in my patient conversations and do not prey upon those who receive a cancer diagnosis for my own financial benefit. Western medicine believes in fear as its selling strategy: if you do not do what they say, you will die. Many alternative medicine methods believe in bashing the Western medical system as their selling strategy. I believe in returning a patient to optimum health and quality of life so that they live long past their diagnosis, and hopefully this shifts the body into removing the cancer itself.

I know this is a long answer to the short question of 'what can Chinese medicine do for cancer?', but it is the most honest answer I can give. Please be sure to take time in making your decisions, thinking through what they will mean for you and your family in three weeks, three months, three years and 30 years. If that decision includes our clinic, I look forward to being with you on your treatment journey.

Sincerely,

Andrew Nugent-Head

Chief Practitioner, The Alternative Clinic

Born in 1967, Andrew Nugent-Head lived in China from 1986 to 2014 studying Chinese medicine, martial arts and daoyin. He studied with some of the last generation of traditional practitioners born and educated prior to 1949, preserving their knowledge before the arts were socialised in the 1950s and restructured into what is practised today. Dedicated to saving the skills and perspectives of these practitioners, his work has generated thousands of hours of footage and hundreds of seminars. With the passing of his teachers, Andrew returned to the USA. Along with his wife and fellow practitioner JulieAnn Nugent-Head, he runs a teaching clinic - the Alternative Clinic in Asheville, North Carolina - focusing on the efficacy of classical Chinese medicine.