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Can Integrative Oncology Extend Life in Advanced Disease?

Roxanne Nelson

October 25, 2013

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DRUG & REFERENCE INFORMATION

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VANCOUVER, British Columbia — Integrative oncology might extend the lives of patients with advanced cancer, new research suggests.

Although the outcomes data are far from conclusive, they are interesting and promising. However, controlled studies are needed.

Integrative oncology is an emerging field that looks at the whole mind, and spirit. It incorporates evidence-based mainstream oncology (such as surgery, chemotherapy, radiation) with therapies complementary (such as nutrition, naturopathic, yoga, meditation).

To date, the survival data compare favorably with national and regional statistics, explained Leanna Standish, PhD, the School of Public Health at the University of Washington and the Bastyr University Integrative Oncology Research Center (BIORC), both in Seattle.

However, the comparative use of publicly available survival datasets is limited, and a prospective matched controlled trial is needed.

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Can Integrative Oncology Extend Life in Advanced Disease?	Herbal Cream Promising in Reducing High-Grade Anal Lesions	Acupuncture Reduces Neuropathy Associated With Bortezomib	Test Distinguishes Early Lung Cancer From Benign Nodules
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to live and what is my quality of life going to be?"

The BIORC opened in 2009, after receiving a \$50,000 grant from a man whose wife had died from breast cancer wondering if there was a better way to treat the disease. To date, 521 cancer patients have been enrolled in a prospective cohort series that involves all disease stages, including ductal carcinoma in situ, Dr. Standish reported.

Originally, all patients were from the Seattle area, but they are now coming from around the country. The most common cancers seen at BIORC are breast cancer, lung, colon, pancreatic, brain, and Merkel cell carcinoma, which is a high-risk skin cancer. About 30% of the patients have stage IV disease.

Limited Comparison Data

One of the major challenges in doing a prospective consecutive case series is finding the right comparison data," Seattle Cancer Care Alliance, which is just next door, has outcomes online for all the major types of cancer, so we're matching our outcomes with their data."

But the problem with those data, even though they were collected in the same city, is that they date from 1998 to 2005 and the data are also out of date, Dr. Standish pointed out. "In fact, every kind of cancer registry that you can find is out of date."

Encouraging Stats

Since 2009, the BIORC has treated 8 patients with stage IV colon cancer. Three years after the initiation of their care, 15% were still alive; only 15% of Seattle Cancer Care patients in this group were alive at 3 years.

Of the 12 consecutive patients with stage IV lung cancer treated at BIORC, 64% were still alive at 3 years. This compares favorably with the 15% reported by Seattle Cancer Care and the 3% reported by SEER.

To calculate median survival, you have to wait until 50% of your patients have died, Dr. Standish explained. "We haven't reached that point for any of our patients, so we can't calculate it. Even though the Seattle data are old, the comparison is interesting."

However, at this point, it is unclear whether "these are just special people or it's something we are doing," she noted.

The BIORC has treated 12 patients with stage IV ovarian cancer. Median survival is 2 years, which is about the same as the published data. "But I am encouraged that our 4- and 5-year survival will be better," she noted. "In the literature, the 5-year survival at 5 years is 18%."

Preventing Recurrence

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compared patients with stage IV breast cancer who had received intravenous therapy with those who had not. "Right now, it looks like there might be a better outcome for stage IV breast cancer patients who received it," she said.

Of 46 patients, 18 received intravenous therapy. At 3 years, it looks like there might be an effect. "Right now, 100% of patients who received intravenous treatments are alive, compared with 70% who didn't," she said.

One of the intravenous therapies used is artemisinin, which is approved by the US Food and Drug Administration and has shown promise as a cancer treatment. So far, the 6 patients with stage IV cancer treated with artemisinin received intravenous therapy for 3 years. "It doesn't mean anything," she pointed out. "They could be alive for any number of reasons, but it is encouraging. It suggests a hypothesis that the combination of artemisinin and ascorbic acid is especially effective in breast cancer."

A better grasp of the effect of integrative oncology is in the works. The National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine has given funding for Dr. Standish and her team to conduct a matched comparison study of breast cancer patients. "We started in 2010 and have enrolled 571 patients to date," she said. "What is exciting is that we are now into this sufficiently large study where the groups are well matched."

"That means that we have a really good chance of seeing the outcomes of integrative oncology," she concluded.

10th International Conference of the Society for Integrative Oncology (SIO): Abstract 79. Presented October 11-15, 2013, San Francisco, CA.

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Post as: Dr. Terry Wright

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