

Cancer: A Holistic Discussion

He arrives for his first appointment, having decided that he would pursue a course in holistic treatment, rather than a conventional one. This patient is new to holistic treatment and is scared near-to-death with his recent diagnosis. He says, "They said I have SCLC, Small Cell Lung Cancer. I don't understand why. I never smoked a day in my life, I take care of myself, and I've lived a good, fair life. They say I have less than a year. My father died this way, even after surgery and chemotherapy. He didn't smoke either. My friend referred me, saying you might be able to help." He is visibly shaken, obviously still reeling from the news.

While practitioners welcome the opportunity to serve, a scenario like this may give rise to some rather nervous moments at first. The patient is frightened and knows little about holistic treatment. The practitioner knows there is far more to this case than the name of a disease and a prognosis. Cancer is thought of as an invasive, aggressive, and obviously life-threatening disease, one that is viewed with as much malevolence as it is capable of reaping in the body. The very word "cancer" implies something awful that eats away at the body. Silent, unseen invaders, malignancies are the enemy – and they are to be waged against and either conquered or fought to the death. Those that fall are considered "victims of cancer." In a situation like this, it is important for the patient and family to learn about and understand the holistic perspective, because there is much to explore in order to settle on a course of treatment. Beginning with an explanation of "disease" can help.

Conventionally, it is quite impossible to have a set of symptoms be treated without first giving them a collective name, as though this lends understanding and focus to the problem. A patient who suffers shortness of breath, tiredness, lack of appetite, recurring pneumonia, and sharp pains beneath the shoulder blade cannot be treated because the disease is not known. But, after a series of investigations and a diagnosis of "lung cancer," the fight is on! Holistically, the patient should know that cancer is not viewed as a disease with a name, but rather is part of a set of symptoms being expressed by the vital force (the energy that animates) because there is a lack of balance in the whole being. In other words, the cancerous cells and associated symptoms being experienced are the *result* of "dis-ease" or lack of energetic balance, not the cause of it. Simply stated, one doesn't get out of balance because one has cancer, one gets cancer because one is out of balance.

With this idea, a discussion of susceptibility can be quite helpful. In this example, the patient is confounded by having a type of cancer that is generally related to smoking (although more rare than other types of lung cancer) and occurs far more frequently in men, yet he has never smoked. His father has the same history. An estimated eighty-seven percent of lung cancer cases in the United States occur in patients with a history of smoking¹, yet that means that thirteen percent occurs in patients with no history of smoking. If the smoking cases are caused by smoking, what are non-smoking cases caused by? Not smoking? While it may be true that smoking leads to higher risk, it can be as easily argued that any other factor in this population can be suspected as causative using conventional logic. More men develop SCLC and more women develop NSMLC. Why? A discussion of susceptibility should not be directed at debunking conventional views, but directed towards helping a patient understand that

¹ Oncolink, Abramson Cancer Center of the University of Pennsylvania, <http://www.oncolink.org/types>. Lung Cancer, the Basics, Christopher Dolinsky, MD. "Every smoker is at risk for lung cancer. It is estimated that 87% of all cases of lung cancer are caused by cigarette smoking. The major risk factor for lung cancer is cigarette smoking."

susceptibility simply means *vulnerability*. This is an area of thought that is quite lacking in conventional medicine. While some consideration is given to a patient's family history and genetics, the idea of susceptibility is truly a foreign one to western medicine. A patient may be considered "at risk" or "vulnerable" or perhaps "pre-disposed" to cancer if his or her family (parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents) also has a history of the disease, but this is about as far as it goes. Susceptibility can be also defined as *the propensity for a patient to become ill in a certain way under certain conditions, relative to causative factors and the absence of energetic balance or harmony*. In this way, susceptibility depends upon many different factors, and illness/disease or expressing symptoms can be a result of impacts at any level. Helping patients to understand the basics of susceptibility will enable them to view their situation in a different light, and perhaps become more open to exploring areas other than the physical.

It would be important to point out that "dis-ease" is not *caused* by something external to us, but rather we succumb due to our vulnerabilities and inability to regain balance. Holistically, cancer is viewed as any other disturbance – it is the result of an imbalance in the vital energy of a person who is susceptible in such a way as to produce symptoms of malignancy – not to be discounted, surely, but to be treated as a serious state of "dis-ease" on all levels. A patient with cancer will no doubt struggle not only with the original energetic conditions that resulted in the development of malignancy, but after such a diagnosis must also contend with tremendous shock, fear, anger, and other impacts that can accelerate depletion of the immune system.²

During this discussion, the holistic view of *where* symptoms are expressed should also be introduced. We human beings are not a pile of physical parts. When we are out of balance and our energy is depleted, we express unique symptoms on *every* level: physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual. Thus, one patient with cancer may express accompanying symptoms of weepiness, confusion, and loss of memory, while another may express symptoms of anger, frustration, inability to do simple math, and have horrible nightmares. Explaining to a patient that the uniqueness of who they are and what they are experiencing on every level is important in determining a course of treatment can go a long way to help them make informed decisions about their own care. Just as we do not get a headache because our body lacks aspirin, we do not get cancer because our body lacks chemotherapy or radiation. When it comes to holistic medicine, one-size treatment does not fit all.

Using this approach, the topic of removing symptoms can also be discussed, as this can be a rather difficult concept to grasp, particularly for patients who have grown up with conventional medical ideas and treatments. The understanding of symptoms and how to deal with them is a fundamental and quite polarized difference between conventional and holistic practitioners. Patients should understand that elimination of symptoms equates to "cure" in conventional medicine. No more symptoms, no more disease. No more disease means that health is restored. It seems almost to be a simple math problem: health = no symptoms, disease = symptoms.³

² While the idea of causative factors and susceptibility may seem esoteric, a full academic explanation isn't necessary. The general ideas should be shared with the patient, however.

³ Even in terms of so-called mental illness or disease, medical research is directed at attempting to discover the physical causes of it, such as differences in brain size, amount of white versus grey matter in various areas of the brain, physical problems within the hypothalamus, pituitary, and other organs that can affect the brain (which is treated synonymously with the "personality" or "spirit" or "presence" of a person; this is why a mentally ill person is assumed to suffer from physical symptoms of the brain.). Most importantly, conventional views do not tend to support or officially recognize the connection between spiritual, mental, or emotional aspects of a human being related to the material, nor is there a focus on causative factors – this is the primary reason conventional medicine

Holistically, it would be absolutely critical to emphasize that the symptoms being expressed on every level are quite valuable for various reasons:

First, they are there because the vital force is expressing itself, as though shouting, "Help! I am stuck! I am trying to be balanced, but I cannot!" In this sense, symptoms are recognized as the means by which the vital force attempts to right itself; the dis-ease is not a set of symptoms, but rather a state that causes the production of certain symptoms in the body's attempt to heal itself. Elimination of symptoms simply means the vital force must express itself in some other fashion on a deeper level. In the case of malignancy, this can be quite a dangerous course.⁴ In this light, it is quite understandable to see why a patient may develop cancer in a remaining lung after having one removed, or why removal of a breast and lymph nodes may result in tumors of the brain and bone.

Second, the symptoms allow holistic practitioners to get a clear view of the whole person and this can help in the selection of an appropriate treatment that is uniquely matched to the patient's state. Enabling a patient to understand that a tumor is an expression of the vital force (as are other symptoms), or is a result of an overall state (and is not the state itself, or is not the disease itself or the "cause" of symptoms), can go a long way toward helping them settle into holistic treatment. A patient may become alarmed if symptoms become stronger or aggravated during treatment, so taking the time to explain the process of cure and restoration from a holistic perspective can also go a long way to prevent fears and concern, enabling the patient to hang in there for the long haul.

Finally, if a person is severely depleted, every symptom present will be important to gather a clear, expressive picture. From a holistic perspective, "health" is viewed more in terms of energy balance and includes not only the physical, but the emotional, mental, and spiritual places as well. While cancer can be considered a very serious state of physical pathology, the whole patient must be viewed and treated in order for it to be possible to regain true health (freedom from limitation). In fact, it is quite possible for a patient with cancer to enjoy quite a degree of 'health' when treated holistically.

Holistically, healing can be defined as gradual movement towards balanced energy, which may or may not involve the complete disappearance of symptoms. Some indigenous cultures draw a distinction between the words "cure" and "heal" in that "cure" implies absence of symptoms much in the way of conventional views, and "heal" implies a much deeper reconciliation of energy – in fact, one who has been healed may actually still have physical symptoms of

misses the mark when it comes to the treatment of illness and disease. From a conventional perspective, a patient with cancer cannot be restored to health unless the physical signs of the disease (e.g. tumors) are removed and treatments employed to "prevent" further tumors or to treat secondary locations. While restoring "health," the patient may actually be far worse off in terms of energy, balance, and strength of immunity, left in a severely depleted state after the cancer is treated and "cured."

⁴ Obviously, a patient may be in the position of having to opt for surgery in the case of tumors that are an immediate threat to life, such as one blocking an airway, pressing on the brain, and so forth. Again, the objective would be to help a patient understand and provide enough information to make an informed decision. In such a case, holistic treatment can be taken up after removal of the tumor.

disease, because there are spiritual, mental, and emotional implications in healing that may actually involve embracing the limitations of physical illness such that it becomes a source of strength to a patient who begins to realize that life is much deeper and more meaningful than what appears on the physical or material realm. From a holistic viewpoint, this latter is more in tune with the intentions of the word “cure.” Cure implies movement towards health, balanced energy, or a reduction in limiting factors – treatment that helps to bring a patient closer to a balanced state on all levels (homeopathically, this would be recognized as movement towards cure according to Hering’s Law).⁵

⁵ Encouraging a patient to sustain a balanced lifestyle (inasmuch as possible) during treatment should also be considered, taking into consideration a healthy diet, plenty of rest, reduction of stress, avoiding the use of stimulants, and so forth. But I also think it is important to be flexible and compassionate regarding regimen, and patients should be encouraged to partake in reasonable activities that are comforting to them while they are undergoing treatment.

A friend lamented to me that she wished her friend (who is very ill with cancer) would eat better, and that surely a better diet would help, mentioning that her friend only craved apple pie. She said she didn’t know what to do about it. If it were my friend, I think I would bake a pie for her.