

Some epidemiological aspects of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) use among cancer patients

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Background: Use of CAM in chronic disease conditions is increasing. A holistic approach for cancer treatment is the need of the day.

Objectives: (1) To explore some qualitative aspects of CAM use by cancer patients (2) To investigate some correlates of CAM use and other epidemiological parameters in the domain of CAM use in cancer.

Methods: A qualitative survey of cancer patients attending oncology unit of GMCH Chandigarh by interview method.

Results: Pilot survey of 140 cancer patients including 69 male and 71 females (32.9% from rural and 67.1% from urban background indicated lack of knowledge regarding causes and signs/symptoms of cancer. Among all patients surveyed, 68 (48.6%) have already undergone radiotherapy, 67% chemotherapy, and 37 (26.4%) surgery. They were having lot of misconceptions regarding the disease. About 21% were of the opinion that the disease was due to sins of misdeeds sometimes in the past or due to displeasure of God (77%). About 89% patients were satisfied with the treatment whatever they were receiving. Overall awareness of CAM was reported to be among 111 (79.3%) patients and about 19% patients reported CAM use as cancer treatment currently/sometimes in the past. Awareness of Ayurveda (74.3%) followed by Naturopathy (73.6%) and Homeopathy (63.6%) were among main CAM. Other CAM methods practiced included Unani, Siddha, Laughter therapy, Yoga meditation and spiritual healing, etc. Closure of CAM towards nature (61.4%) and easy availability (57.9%) were among main reasons reported in favour of CAM use. Only in case of 12.9% cases, CAM use was asked by their treating doctors. Discontinuation of herbal medicine use was reported mainly due to high cost involved and no guarantee of its efficacy against their usual assumptions that these are inexpensive and effective. Most of the cancer patients had lost their hope of life and most of them self satisfied with whatever allopathic treatment they were receiving. Regarding holistic approach for curing the disease, patients were of the opinion that it is something related with God and related with body and mind. About 69.2% strongly believed that spiritual health dimension also exists and 46.1% were the opinion that spirituality can cope with illness in a better way. Faith in God was reportedly increased by 76.9% patients after their sufferings from the disease. Most of patients felt satisfied with the behaviour of treating doctors, staff and with their family members. It might be due to their changed attitude and psychological conditions with perceptions of no hope of life.

Conclusions and Suggestions: CAM use among cancer patients is prevalent irrespective of their socio-demographic characteristics. CAM therapies should not be blindly ignored without testing their efficacy on scientific basis. Detailed studies on CAM use by cancer patients should be conducted for better understanding and evaluation of holistic approach for care of cancer patients in Indian set-up.

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