Aromatherapy Support in Cancer Treatment

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Cancer, or neoplastic disease, is the second highest cause of death in the United States following heart disease. More cancers are being detected early enough to cure thanks to newer diagnostic imaging and computer technologies such as spiral CT scans, sonograms and sophisticated MRI’s. The present day standard of treatment methods include chemotherapy, radiation, surgery and transplantation (e.g. stem cells) with current research being conducted in areas such as gene based therapy, monoclonal antibodies, vaccines and angiogenesis. However, in light of the impressive advances in medical technological research, the holistic practitioner must endeavor in safeguarding a unified intention and supportive treatment protocol. Dealing with cancer, as with all disease states, must appeal to the holistic viewpoint, considering the bio-psychosocial-spiritual aspects of the person. 'Treat the person not the disease' is the aphorism to adopt following the precedent of 'first do no harm'.

Part of an holistic assessment will include the patient's diet, digestion, sleep, support system, etc., and will also take into consideration the condition of their heart, mind and soul. Aromatherapy support in cancer treatment is just one adjunct to a multi-dimensional approach. It is rarely too late to support the healing process by incorporating an organic restorative diet, nor is it fruitless to encourage mild exercise such as yoga, various forms of manual healing, botanical medicine as well as participation in support groups and even animal companion programs when

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appropriate. The latter encourages patients to bring their pets to their chemotherapy sessions and record an improvement of as much as 84%. All of the above methodologies have been found to lessen the various side effects caused by chemotherapy.

Aromatherapy excels in the 1) remediation of infectious states and prevention thereof, 2) improving immune response, 3) regulating neuro-hormonal imbalances as well as having a 4) positive effect on the psycho-emotional state. Considering this, aroma therapy has much to offer and a wide application in the care of the person challenged with cancer. Integrative aromatherapy "embraces the art, science and bio-energetics of the skilled use of essential oils for their positive effects in all aspects of life" (CCooksley and Kyle). It also incorporates the use of essential oils with one or more complimentary therapies such as massage, hydrotherapy, acupressure, etc. to increase the essential oil effectiveness and benefit to the recipient.

Today, as never before, the patient and practitioner have an abundance of safe and supportive methods of healing available to them. It can be said that we stand amidst the best of all worlds. Aromatherapy, together with other effective complimentary therapies, is customized into individual prescriptions for healing mind, body and soul. These can be combined with the aforementioned modern advances in cancer treatment and are considered in this paper. In addition, holism from a larger perspective, relates to the multi-disciplinary approach. Besides the patient and family members, the health team works together for the benefit of the patient: nurse, oncologist, family practitioner, naturopath, aromatherapist, pastoral care giver, social worker, dietician and others.

Hospitals and outpatient oncology clinics are inherently "non-naturelike" in almost every aspect, justified by the presentation of a false sense of sterility within its environment. This description epitomizes what Paolo Rovesti referred to when he described the suppression of
scent in society and its detrimental effect on individual identity. Heretofore, when personal identity, protection and empowerment are nonexistent, the patients find themselves in an environment that is directly oppositional to what is conducive in a healing crisis.

Allopathic cancer therapies involve asking two basic questions and is representative of the masculine aspect of how cancer treatment is perceived. The oncologist accountable for the patients’ medical treatment asks: What is the most effective cytotoxic substance to use against this type of cancer and what is the highest dose that can be given? In traditional oncology the characteristic mindset is to lead in the war against cancer and the weaponry used is an arsenal of cytotoxic chemicals and radiation. What is desperately missing in many obsolete hospitals and outpatient clinical settings is the feminine principle to direct the patient closer to a healthful state. The feminine aspect would strengthen rather than attack, nurture instead of sustain and in the utmost exemplar, substitute pleasure for pain and personal liberty for total dependence.

Herbal medicine is directed toward the underlying causes, such as stimulation of the immune system and promotion of detoxification, in addition to the provision of symptomatic relief. There are several excellent herbal formulae available as well as single botanicals used for the above objectives. In addition to herbal medicine, there are numerous alternative treatment options utilized in natural based cancer eradication such as biofrequency machines, enzymatic nutritional therapy and intensive detoxification protocols.

In Psychoneuroimmunoendocrinology, the immune system can be likened to a bridge between our past and our future, mind and body. When the immune system necessitates being at its optimal level of functioning, it is most likely to be in a weakened condition. Numerous factors are known to diminish the immune response such as stress to the mental state, feelings of fear and dependence, the powerlessness and isolation caused by hospitalization and so forth. However, there are two more factors specific to cancer that playa
primary role in this vulnerable predicament: tumor progression and disease state and the aggressive treatment undergone in attempt to battle the neoplasm.

Ultimately the aim is to assist and support the person with cancer in making informed decisions regarding the following areas to improve their overall health and well being: to create a healthy lifestyle, support healthy relationships and to purify their environment (detoxify physiological terrain and purify external environments). In so doing, an improved attitude, diminished side effects and an increase in energy will result in health promotion on all levels. Aromatherapy and other healing strategies are integrated to increase this vital energy. Equilibrium must be restored for the body to heal itself both on physical and psycho-emotional-spiritual levels. Due to the disturbance in the psycho-spiritual body, aromatherapy can be of principal importance. Use of essential oils for lifestyle and behavior modification and in meditation and prayer are a few examples.

Four primary intentions of the integrative aromatherapist and/or holistic nurse in caring for the patient challenged with cancer: (not necessarily in order of importance as this will depend upon the persons' state of mind, etc.) include: offering hope, giving support, relieving symptoms and educating the patient and family members. There is a wide variety of nursing diagnoses related to cancer treatment, which, in my experience, makes it one of the most challenging areas of nursing. A nursing diagnosis is a "clinical judgement about an individual, family or community responses to actual or potential health problems or to life processes" (North American Nursing Diagnosis Association). Integrative aromatherapy has been observed serviceable in the majority of the dozen or more health challenges I have identified as significant in this nursing specialty. Several of these are discussed here in relation to aromatherapy and herbal strategies and specific symptomatic relief.

Comprehensive aromatherapy treatment is based on continual assessment. Life itself is a dynamic process and ever changing, therefore the most effective treatment plan should also be pliant.
Note that the goal is not to simply improve the patient's health condition and tolerance in order to surrender to the cancer treatment afflictions, and thereby submit their dependence. Rather, the holistic practitioner or caregiver should aim to awaken them into becoming whole, interdependent and spiritual beings experiencing a human provocation. From the mind/body/spirit representation there are the psychological stressors, physical symptomology and the subjective perceptions and/or spiritual wellbeing.

The psyche includes, but is not limited to, mental tension, anxiety, fear, depression, feelings of isolation, etc. The sedating effects of essential oils to the central nervous system will prove beneficial as will the euphoric essences, along with the power of thought and belief, promotion of emotional release and reduction of stress. Tension, stress, anxiety and fear were reported as the most common reasons for aroma therapy referral in a hospital study in England (S.M. Kite et al). The study concluded that aromatherapy massage reduced patients' psychological distress and improved symptoms related to cancer treatment. Strategic essential oils to use for the alleviation of stress and enhancement of relaxation are Roman chamomile (Anthemis nobilis), Frankincense (Boswellia carteriO, Neroli (Citrus aurantium), Lavender (Lavandula angustifolia), Sweet Marjoram (Origanum marjorana), Rose (Rosa damascena) and Sandalwood (Santalum album). Herbal infusions as well as Flower Essence therapy are also strongly encouraged as part of the holistic approach to positively affect the psychological state of the individual.

In the physical realm one will observe symptoms such as insomnia, lack of energy, pain, nausea, skin integrity impairment, secondary infection and oral mucous membrane alteration and others. There is often weight loss due to decreased appetite and anorexia, which may or may not be a direct result of the tumor. A decreased enjoyment of food, early satiety due to altered tastes and sensations, especially to sweetness, is another common complaint. Ulceration of oral and digestive mucosa caused by chemotherapy can be lessened.

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with Aloe (Aloe barbadensis) which protects against inflammation. Golden Seal (Hydrastis canadensis) promotes healing of mucosal membranes and acts as a broad-spectrum antimicrobial. A good homemade mouth wash will prove very helpful and can be tailored to the specific symptom (e.g. viral versus fungal infection, Cooksley). Mild to moderate nausea is a major side effect from chemotherapy and may be prevented entirely if Ginger (Zingiber officinalis) is taken in tea or capsule form prior to treatment. Marijuana (Cannabis sativa), available by prescription as Marrinol, is also an effective antiemetic. Aromatherapy has several good essential oils to prevent or decrease the nausea caused by cytotoxic drugs. The most widely used are Ginger (Zingiber officinalis), Peppermint (Mentha piperita)* and Fennel (Foeniculum vulgare). These oils can be prepared for inhalation purposes or applied in a massage lotion. Acupressure points such as Pe6 (inside wrist, Battaglia) has been very beneficial with both of the above applications. *Use caution with Peppermint (Mentha piperita) in skin application, as it is known to cause skin irritation if used in strong dilution.

And last but not least, the spiritual wellbeing is always deeply affected. "Spiritual wellbeing is the affirmation of life in a relationship with God, self, community and environment that nurtures and celebrates wholeness" (National Interfaith Consultation, 1975). The patient's perception of comfort, independence, quality of life, hope, inner peace and presence or absence of the nature/ universal aspect is compromised and must be addressed. Intent and caring, using massage or comfort touch, conveys worthiness and nurturing. Essential oils can be successfully incorporated with guided imagery as an anchor, with chakra and energy body balancing, and with color and sound therapy to create profound alterations in spiritual states.

Union with nature is not to be discounted in the uninspiring, quasisanitary clinical environment. Fresh-cut fragrant flowers, living cleanair plants, ambient use of aromatherapy and nature art should all be primary additions to the patient's room or outpatient setting.

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Essential oils which lift the spirits, increase feelings of wellbeing and bring light into the spiritual body are worthy of inclusion. Two notable "carriers of light" are Eucalyptus (Eucalyptus citriodora, E. radiata) and Grapefruit (Citrus paradisi). Euphoric and antidepressant oils such as the florals are highly desirable for these intentions and include Neroli (Citrus aurantium), Lavender (Lavandula angustifolia), Ylang-ylang (Canaga odorata), Rose (Rosa damascena) and Jasmine (Jasminum officinale). Supportive care also adopts a sense of acceptance, caring and support as well as a sincere respect of the patient's value system and spiritual practices. Essential oils and deep breathing practices that promote relaxation, centering and oxygenation are of prime importance as well. Some of the essences of antiquity for spiritual union that can be used with great success are Frankincense (Boswellia carterii), Helichrysm (Helichrysm italicum), Elemi (Canarium communis), Galbanum (Ferula galbaniflua) and Spikenard (Nardastachus jatamansi).

The primary pursuit of caring for people with cancer is to alleviate human suffering in all aspects of life discussed thus far. The first step in this pursuit is to empower patients to take responsibility for their own personal health and use essential oil therapy and other natural supportive regimes to reate health. I encourage you to be facilitators, educators and "beacons of light" to guide them, supporting and creating the optimal circumstances for patients to heal themselves. Otherwise one could argue that true constitutional healing had not taken place, but only a superficial, asymptomatic, transitory state found. The perpetual intent is individualism and healing of mind, body and soul.

As a former Oncology Nurse, I have observed cancer to be one of the most challenging of diseases to overcome for a great number of patients, however, it has also been perceived as a catalyst for personal growth and healing. In reaching beyond one's physical limitations and questioning the meaning of life and mortality, it is most likely here on a soul level, within the realm of trusting possibility, that one attains inner peace and enhanced quality and longevity of life.

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