Integrative oncology in the Middle East: Researching traditional remedies to address supportive cancer care

The incidence of cancer in the Middle East is on the rise; yet, for many of the patients, measurable improvements in their quality of life still remain to be demonstrated. For several cancers the disease is no longer fatal, however, the chronic nature of the illness and, consequently, quality of life issues become very important for patients and their families, as well as for the practitioners who wish to deliver optimal care. It is in this regard that integrative oncology (i.e. the judicious combination of conventional and complementary therapies) may play a major role. Complementary and Alternative Medicines (CAM) including mind–body therapies, acupuncture, herbs, botanicals and other dietary supplements, and a variety of lifestyle modifications, are currently being used during active treatment in an effort to manage the disease and, especially, to alleviate treatment-related symptoms.

As others have pointed out, the term “CAM” is problematic, because many simply view CAM as “alternative” rather than as a group of therapies and disciplines that are used in conjunction with conventional treatments. In response, the terms “integrative Medicine” and “Integrative Oncology” are now commonly used.

David Rosenthal has delineated the principles of integrative oncology as combining the best of evidence-based complementary therapy and the best evidence-based conventional therapy for each patient. Moreover, he posits that integrative oncology should ultimately not have to be distinguished as a separate entity, but be included with routine cancer care (Rosenthal, 2009) [1].

In an effort to launch a serious discussion of these issues by cancer caregivers in the Middle East, an innovative workshop entitled Integrative Oncology in the Middle East: Role of Traditional Medicines in Supportive Cancer Care was offered through the Middle East Cancer Consortium (MECC) and held in June 2010 in Larnaca, Cyprus. Support was provided by a number of organizations including the National Cancer Institute, the Institute for Integrative Health and the Symington Foundation. Over 60 oncologists, nurses and social workers, as well as integrative medicine physicians and scientists, mostly from the countries that are members of MECC (Cyprus, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Palestinian Authority and Turkey), and leading individuals from Europe, India and the United States, attended the forum. A number of the key presentations were published as full manuscripts in EUJIM over the past several months [2–5]. In this issue of EUJIM, we complete the collection from that workshop by providing short summaries of the noteworthy presentations in the form of extended abstracts.

With the increase in the success of various cancer treatments, the number of cancer survivors has also increased, and with that the need for supportive cancer care. We look forward to further research outcomes in Integrative Oncology in the Middle East and around the world to establish best practices for enabling patients to tolerate therapy and to treat therapy-related symptoms.

References


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