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A survey of alternative therapies in chemotherapy patients – a Cancer Centre study

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Introduction: Cancer patients [pts] often seek alternative therapies [AT], although they can interact with their oncological treatment. No survey has evaluated use or knowledge of AT by pts in the UK.

Aims: Determine frequency of use and nature of AT in an unselected group of chemotherapy pts. Evaluate number of pts at risk from drug interactions. Determine need for pt information and medical training on AT.

Methods: A questionnaire was designed and approved by local ethics and research committees. Given to all pts attending chemotherapy clinics for 3 weeks. Anonymous but included data on age, sex, site of primary cancer, stage of disease and knowledge of AT.

Results: Respondents=67. Male=17, female=50. Primary sites= lung (13), breast (13), sarcoma/melanoma (6), colorectal (11), pancreas/upper GI (7), gynaecological (17). 5 pts were undergoing adjuvant treatment, 62 had advanced disease. Whereas 64% said they would like information on AT, only 7% said it had been given. Pt understanding of AT ranged widely including herbal or physical remedies and even surgery. 16/67 pts were taking oral AT. 2 faced potential drug interactions not recognised by the oncologists.

Conclusions: Responders were more likely to be female, have advanced disease, or rare cancer with limited treatment options. Pts would like more information on AT, although it is rarely given. Oncologists may need further education to inform pts and prevent harmful drug interactions.