



Facing Cancer... *What Can We Do?*

Taking an integrative approach: Homeopathic treatment for people with cancer

by AMY ROTHENBERG, ND, DHANP

IN THE MID-1990S, I HAD THE PLEASURE OF MEETING GENE, A 60-YEAR-OLD, RETIRED postal worker, who came to me for a consultation. Eleven months earlier, this gentle, kind man had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer with metastasis to the liver and with lymphocytic leukemia. This was not good news for anyone. The fact that Gene was one month from retirement at the time of diagnosis was heartbreaking. He and his wife had been through a lot over the years and had been looking forward to this time of life.



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as he could. I went to work taking his homeopathic case, listening to his story, and trying to understand the symptoms as he described them—how they fit into his health history and how they fit into his overall life at the time of our visit. Gene's wife was very helpful, offering information along the way and lovingly supporting her husband of nearly forty years.

How can we help?

I don't know whether this is true for other homeopaths, but during my earlier years of practice, I saw many pregnant women, young children, and growing families. I still see such folks, but as my patient population has aged, I seem to be seeing more patients with serious pathology, including cancer. What is the role of the homeopath when a patient comes to us with a cancer diagnosis? What can we expect homeopathy and other natural medicines to do for such a patient?

In my experience, homeopathic and other natural medicine care is *extremely* helpful, whether used at the time of diagnosis, during conventional cancer treatment, or afterward for healing and prevention of further disease. That said, I believe that, in general, an integrative approach is best. No one practitioner has all the answers. No one healing philosophy has to be embraced to the exclusion of others. And thankfully, there is now increased availability and access to information on how to take the best from seemingly different healing paradigms. What is most important is to be sure there is full disclosure on all sides, so all practitioners and physicians understand what treatment approaches the patient is using.

The homeopathic approach

We homeopaths treat each patient individually. With cancer, as with any illness, we have no set homeopathic remedies to give based on say, what type of cancer the

person has or where the cancer is. There is no list to go check against and prescribe accordingly. Oh how we sometimes wish there were! But homeopathy's beauty, its challenge, and ultimately its promise, is to find medicines that fit the particular patient at a particular point in time.

To the newer homeopathic prescribers that I train, a patient with cancer can seem daunting. The stakes seem higher, but in truth, we use the very same tools of the trade; it is careful case taking and the understanding of all aspects of the patient that will lead to the best remedy possible.

Patients with different needs

Patients recently diagnosed with cancer usually come to me looking for help and information to get through surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation, and to deal with the emotional impact of a cancer diagnosis. They are hoping to reduce side effects and increase the efficacy of the conventional medical approaches they are using.

Many other patients come to see me a year or two after their conventional cancer treatments have been completed. These patients usually fall into one of two categories: 1) those who report that even though they have survived cancer and the treatments, they just do not feel well (perhaps they are tired, or feel they are not thinking clearly, or maybe they aren't sleeping well or feel depressed) and 2) those who feel well enough but are seeking all the help they can find to prevent recurrence of the cancer.

Still other patients, like Gene, arrive at my office in more advanced stages of illness with strong symptoms from the cancer itself—perhaps in the digestive tract or the respiratory tract or the musculoskeletal system. They are seeking symptom relief and an improved quality of life for as long as possible.

Each of these patients is unique and

Surgeons had removed a primary tumor in Gene's abdomen, and he was taking medication to try to slow the growth of the cancer, but his oncologists had told him a cure could not be expected at this late stage in his illness. Gene was now experiencing abdominal pain that radiated to his back. It felt like heartburn, and burping helped some. The pain was worse when he sat up and worse the more he thought about it. For years, Gene had had terrific pains across the front of his abdomen that were worse from eating peanuts, potato chips, or other high fat foods, and occasionally, he would still have those pains.

Gene had come to me for help in relieving his digestive pains, improving his comfort, and enjoying his life for as long

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each must be addressed individually. Sometimes their prognosis is very good and sometimes it is dire, but I find that there is almost always *some* help that we can offer them with homeopathy.

No apparent cancer symptoms

Many patients who are diagnosed with cancer are seemingly asymptomatic. For example, a breast lump might have been discovered on a mammogram, or a prostate cancer may have been diagnosed after a blood test showed elevated PSA (prostate-specific antigen). For these patients, who have typically undergone surgery or other treatment before seeing me, I generally take the full homeopathic case and prescribe a constitutional remedy; I will include my understanding of the cancer in my analysis, but I am also intent on understanding it in the context of the patient's overall health, how their various bodily systems are functioning (e.g., digestion, circulation, etc.), and their physical general symptoms. (Alicia, described later, is an example of such a patient.)

A stressful diagnosis

The stress of receiving a cancer diagnosis itself is often enough to push a patient toward a lower level of health. So, for example, a patient who tended toward allergies and eczema when under stress might experience these symptoms to a greater degree than ever before. We might say that the stress has pushed the person deeper into their constitutional remedy state; and they would benefit from a dose of whatever constitutional remedy they needed before the cancer diagnosis.

Sometimes, however, the stress of the diagnosis is so great or it perhaps triggers such an intense response due to family or personal history, that the patient is bumped into another state of health altogether. That is, instead of (or in addition to) a worsening of their usual symptoms of allergies and eczema, they might develop new and more troublesome symptoms like heart and circulatory problems. In such a case, this person would probably benefit from a different constitutional remedy than the one they might have needed before their cancer diagnosis.

Typically, however, I do not have the certainty of knowing what constitutional

remedy the person needed prior to diagnosis because most who come to me with cancer are new patients. (Like many practicing homeopaths, I find that the rate of cancer among the patients that I have been treating for many years is rather low.)

Symptoms from cancer & its treatment

Then there are the patients who come to me with strong symptoms from the cancer, perhaps based on where the cancer is located in the body, or symptoms that arise during conventional treatment. This person might also benefit from their constitutional remedy if the current symptoms are within the purview of that remedy. For instance, perhaps I have a patient who has done well over the years with the remedy *Phosphorus* on a constitutional level and is now undergoing chemotherapy for breast cancer. She may develop more symptoms, such as easy bruising and extreme fatigue due to her treatments, but she still remains open in her demeanor, in need of affection and attention, and very thirsty. She may be more intensely anxious and be struggling with diarrhea, a new symptom for her. But since each of her issues is still well covered by the remedy *Phosphorus*, I would give her *Phosphorus* again.

Multiple stressors

We can view the receipt of a cancer diagnosis, the cancer itself, and conventional

cancer treatments each as stressors on the system. Most people respond to stressors in predictable and patterned ways, as in the previous example of the woman who would benefit from another dose of her constitutional remedy, *Phosphorus*. But those who respond by developing new symptoms not covered by their usual or former constitutional remedy will need a different prescription. If, for example, this same woman develops easy bruising and bothersome diarrhea, but she also becomes extra anxious, critical, and difficult to please, this represents a shift in her predictable pattern of response. Her new symptoms may signal that instead of *Phosphorus*, she now needs *Arsenicum album* since the new symptoms are more in line with the indications for this remedy.

Nonetheless, I do not have preconceived ideas about how I will prescribe, except that I will look for the most broadly-acting remedy to support the patient in the broadest possible way. I will be alert to the possibility that another remedy may be indicated, especially during the course of conventional treatment, based on how the patient responds to those approaches.

It is fine to have patients use homeopathic medicines right alongside their conventional cancer treatments. I often use a low strength remedy such as a 12c potency, repeated once or twice a day, although I sometimes use a higher potency, such as one dose of 200c, if I think the patient might not remember to take a daily dose. I generally follow up with patients getting conventional treatments more frequently; the worse they feel, the sooner I want to hear back from them or see them again. I instruct them to call me if side effects from conventional treatment are becoming intolerable, if their spirits are really taking a hit, or if other seemingly acute illnesses arise during conventional treatment.

Gene's story

Gene had lost 36 pounds after his surgery but had put back on 20 during his recuperation. Since the tumor, Gene reported sweating profusely on his back and head at night in bed and needing to have a fan blow on him continuously. His labored breathing was obvious in the office that

day. He had difficulty climbing stairs, felt short of breath, and felt weak especially through the knees, arms, shoulders, and hips. He would get bad cramps in his legs and in his hands, which were worse since he'd been placed on Prednisone.

His spleen was enlarged, and he had fainted several times in the last few months. When he was younger, he would pass out at the sight of blood. He had terrible gas ever since the surgery, with constant belching and passing gas, which offered some relief. He had bowel movements two or three times a day, and he desired sweet and salty foods. He had a poor sense of smell and taste and was not especially thirsty.

Gene had a history of smoking a pack of cigarettes a day, but he'd stopped some 20 years ago. He had never been a big drinker of alcohol. He'd had thyroid cancer in his forties. He had high blood pressure.

When asked to describe his temperament he said, "I am a pussycat. It takes a lot to get me going. I don't need friends too much, although I have a few and enjoy them." Gene was very pleasant throughout our conversation, supporting his wife at

every turn, holding her hand, and being incredibly upbeat considering his grave diagnosis and prognosis.

A remedy for Gene

The severe nature of Gene's shortness of breath with his need for constant fanning, coupled with his increasing digestive distress with a lot of gas that was somewhat relieved by belching, would point most experienced homeopaths to the remedy *Carbo vegetabilis*, since these are strong indications for this remedy. Overall weakness and debility is also something we see in patients who need *Carbo vegetabilis*, along with a tendency toward fainting.

Gene received much help from this remedy within the week. He gained immediate strength and was even able to resume his model airplane hobby. He was better able to breathe and his problem with gas was greatly reduced; he still had flatulence, but it was limited to the after-dinner hour and it was not as intense or long-lasting. I told him to call if other problems arose.

Had he needed *Carbo vegetabilis* years earlier, before he developed cancer? His history of digestive symptoms and easy

fainting could point to that. Or perhaps he had needed *Lycopodium* earlier (a remedy often used constitutionally for those with chronic digestive issues), and his illness had pushed him into a *Carbo vegetabilis* state. It is hard to know for certain, as I had never treated him before.

Symptom relief

Gene next came to see me two months later when he reported that although he'd done well for most of the time since our last visit, he was now in a lot of pain. There did not seem to be any position, activity, or medication that would relieve him, and he felt like he could not bear it any longer. He described incessant, strong gas pains; added to that, he was unable to get a good breath. And he had begun to receive further chemotherapy. I believed that he had experienced a relapse along with a continuation of his progressive pathology, so I gave *Carbo vegetabilis* in a higher strength. Within days of taking the remedy, he reported that the pain was under control and his breathing improved.

The homeopathic remedies continued to give Gene symptomatic relief over the

Choosing Integrative Cancer Care



In my experience, an integrative approach to treating cancer is best. For those wanting to receive such treatment under one roof, I have referred numerous patients to The Cancer Treatment Centers of America (CTCA). Their website notes that CTCA: "combines the latest medical, surgical and radiological therapies with supportive therapies like nutrition, mind-body medicine, physical therapy, naturopathy and spiritual wellness, bringing to bear many novel and innovative weapons against your specific type of cancer." CTCA has hospitals or treatment facilities in Zion, IL, Philadelphia, PA, Tulsa, OK, and Seattle, WA, with a new hospital to open near Phoenix, AZ, in 2009. For further information see their website at www.cancercenter.com or call 800-615-3055.

—Amy Rothenberg

More integrative treatment resources

—from the editor

- **The Block Center for Integrative Cancer Care** in Evanston, IL, founded by Keith Block, MD, is another option for integrative treatment, and attracts patients from all over the country. Care is personally tailored to each individual and includes a strong emphasis on diet (high in fruits and vegetables, low in animal proteins, high in anti-inflammatory foods) as well as mind-body approaches, acupuncture, exercise, and supportive supplements—paired with conventional treatments as needed. It is the only U.S. center using chrono-modulated chemotherapy, which they believe is more effective and less debilitating. For information, visit www.blockmd.com or phone 847-492-3040.
- **www.cancerdecisions.com**. Visit this site to research information about conventional and alternative cancer treatments. It is maintained by Ralph Moss, PhD, a medical writer who has been following the subject of cancer treatment for 30 years. An e-newsletter and archive of articles is available at no charge; individual *Moss Reports* on more than 200 different types of cancer can be purchased, along with consultations with Moss.
- **The Oncology Association of Naturopathic Physicians** at www.oncanp.org includes a listing of naturopathic doctors with an interest or specialty in cancer treatment.

course of six months and reduced his need for opiate painkillers with their unwanted effects, for which he and his family were grateful. Gene did die of his cancer, and I treated him right up and through that time

with more *Carbo vegetabilis*, and then with *Arsenicum album*, when his anxiety, fear of death, and restlessness were more than he could bear. After each dose of the *Arsenicum*, his wife would report that Gene

seemed more comfortable, less agitated, and clearer mentally. She was very thankful for our work together, as it gave her husband some peace at the end. This pattern of needing one remedy, then perhaps another, and then winding up at *Arsenicum album* as a person nears death, though not universal, is certainly common. While it is not easy to experience the death of a patient, it is comforting to have helped to make his last days as calm as possible.



Managing Side Effects of Conventional Treatment

While chemotherapy could never be described as a pleasant experience, it should be noted that, in general, patients experience fewer unpleasant side effects than they did a decade or two ago, as oncologists now pay more attention to preventing and treating them with various medications.

For some of the more common side effects of chemotherapy, I prescribe homeopathic remedies acutely, often with very good results, and there is no risk of interfering with conventional treatment. [See page 34 for some examples—ed.] I will also suggest some tried and true naturopathic approaches.

Be aware, however, that some non-homeopathy natural medicine approaches can interfere with the efficacy of chemotherapy and need to be avoided! Other substances are not only safe, but can enhance the efficacy of chemo or prevent/treat side effects. There are few routine prescriptions in this area; they must be individualized to the patient, based on many factors including the type of cancer, the exact chemotherapy treatment, and the patient's unique circumstances.

For example, numerous patients during chemotherapy do develop anemia, but it is not necessarily due to iron deficiency. It would not be advisable to increase iron ingestion unless specifically recommended by a physician, as too much iron can actually increase tumor growth.

For one of the most current and up-to-date sources of information about which substances are both effective and safe to use based on the chemotherapy prescribed, see *Alternative Medicine Magazine's Definitive Guide to Cancer: An Integrative Approach to Prevention, Treatment and Healing*, 2nd edition, 2007, by Lise Alschuler, ND, and Karolyn A. Gazella. It contains a wealth of information presented in a reader-friendly fashion. Chapter 10, "Supporting your Body During Conventional Treatment," does an impressive job outlining the most frequently used chemotherapeutic agents and then, in chart form, listing the common side effects, those nutrients and herbs that both support the efficacy of the chemotherapeutic drug and address side effects, and finally, the nutrients and herbs that must be avoided.

Alicia's goal: stay healthy

Alicia, another patient who came to see me in the 1990s, was diagnosed earlier in the disease process than Gene had been, and her story has had a happier ending. At age 45, she was just hitting her stride as a lawyer and active mother of two robust teenage sons when she found a cancerous lump in her left breast. She had a lumpectomy (no metastasis was detected) followed by chemotherapy and 28 radiation treatments. She came to see me a half-year later, while putting together what she called her "dream team" of advisors, doctors, therapists, family, and friends.

Alicia had taken on her diagnosis and treatment plan with energy and organization. At the time of our first visit, her main request was that I help her to "keep healthy so the cancer won't come back." She also wanted relief from the swelling (lymphedema) in her arm on the same side where she had had the surgery and radiation. She told me that since her treatments, she'd been suffering with a full body rash that was red, slightly raised, and itchy, and worse when she became warm, especially after a shower, while in bed, or if she was out walking.

A good health history

Alicia's health history was remarkably good. She was a longtime vegetarian, who had been running and doing yoga regularly for decades. She had no family history of cancer, and most of her relatives lived into their eighties and nineties. The irony of her diagnosis did not seem to bother her. "Look, bad things happen to good people," she told me, and she was just going to "get on with it" and do what she could to live a healthy and long life.

I took Alicia's homeopathic case and prescribed the remedy *Sulphur*. My rea-

sions included these classic *Sulphur* indications: the left-sidedness of her complaint; an itchy bothersome skin rash that was worse from heat; her outgoing and upbeat nature; and the fact that, aside from the breast cancer, she was quite healthy.

I also instructed her on how to alternate hot and cold soaks to her left hand to get the circulation going along with the physical therapy she was already getting. In addition, I created a vitamin-mineral-botanical medicine program based on her history, her diet, and her willingness to make certain lifestyle changes.

A month later, Alicia returned to my office to say that the swelling and range of motion were improving steadily on her left side and that she was feeling good. The rash, while still visible, was fading and no longer itchy. Alicia was pleased with these results, and I judged that the *Sulphur* was acting well.

For the past ten years, I have worked with Alicia on and off through the changes of her chemotherapy-induced menopause,

acute infections, allergies, and the launching of her children out of the nest. Sometimes I prescribe a homeopathic remedy (*Sulphur* has continued to be a very helpful remedy for her, when indicated), sometimes other naturopathic treatments.

We can help

Alicia has remained free of the cancer and has learned much about taking care of herself. In the process I have learned much, too: to step forward and treat patients who have or have had cancer by using the same tools I use with all my patients, but at the same time to keep up with the current research on cancer and its

treatments—and to try to do it all with confidence and grace.

Between early diagnoses, aggressive allopathic approaches, and our complementary and alternative medicine offerings, many people with cancer live long and healthy, productive lives, post-diagnosis. In my 22 years of experience, I have found homeopathic care to be very beneficial for patients with cancer—used at the time of diagnosis, during conventional treatment, and afterward for healing and prevention of further disease.



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