Integrative Oncology – a New Hope in a Losing Battle?

Are we losing the battle against cancer?

There are 14 million new cases of cancer occurring worldwide every year.

Almost two-thirds of these people will die, or 8 million. The WHO estimates this number will almost double in the next two decades.

We find ourselves living in an increasingly toxic world, with our fish contaminated with mercury, chickens fed arsenic to increase their appetite, and livestock injected with hormones to fatten them up.

This places an unprecedented burden on our body's detoxification and immune systems, says Dr. Stephen Chan, Director of Life Clinic in Hong Kong. Much of our defence against cancer depends on these two systems, he says.

"We are forming potential cancer cells all the time," says Dr. Chan.

"Ninety-nine percent of these DNA mutations are either repaired by mechanisms within the cell itself, or the cell is set to "self-destruct", a process known as "apoptosis", which normally removes the remaining one percent."

If any mutated cells slip through the net, they can replicate uncontrollably and invade our surrounding tissues, until they reach (or grow their own) blood vessels.

Once they have achieved this, they have a highway to spread to other areas like the liver, bones or brain.

Conventional treatment strategies have focused on physically cutting out the cancer (surgery), irradiating it (radiotherapy) or destroying it with cytotoxic (ie. cell-toxic) agents (chemotherapy). Whereas these can be effective in early-stage cancers, they are generally not so effective with more advanced stage III or IV cancers, when the cancers have already spread.

"The problem is cancer cells are extremely cunning, and have multiple mechanisms to evade capture," Dr. Chan says. "They can switch off a cell's normal defences that normally would trigger self-destruction (known as the P53 tumour suppressor gene), or turn up or "amplify" those genes that help them live. They can hide in areas where there is poor blood supply, making it hard for chemotherapy to reach them, and they can develop ways to deactivate a drug, like pumping it out of the cell."

Any successful strategy to deal with cancer should include ways to make it harder for the cancer cell to grow, like alkalinising the blood or starving it of sugar, Dr. Chan says. An all-too-common scenario is for a patient to initially do well on chemotherapy, only for the cancer to return with a vengeance six months later, metastasised to other parts of the body, and now resistant to the initial chemotherapy agents.

Whereas conventional cancer treatments like chemotherapy and radiotherapy look at destroying the cancer cells (and much of the surrounding or normal cells), "Integrated Oncology" looks not only at targeting the cancer cells, but also at addressing the surrounding conditions that allowed the cancer to exist in the first place.

"Ultimately, this approach aims at keeping the body strong and

optimally supported, whether the patient chooses to engage in standard chemotherapy or radiotherapy treatments, or not. There is really no point in successfully killing all the cancer cells, if the patient carrying them doesn't survive the experience," Dr. Chan said.

An Integrated Oncology doctor or practitioner may use a number of diagnostic and therapeutic tools, and these might include:

1.Cancer Cells Sensitivities

Circulating cancer cells isolated from a blood test are tested against a panel of different chemotherapy or natural agents to see which kill it best.

This is akin to how bacteria are routinely tested against different antibiotics .

These "cancer cell sensitivities" can help an Integrated Oncologist or practitioner to select the best drug or nutritional supplement for their patients.

2.High-dose intravenous Vitamin C

High-dose vitamin C infusions have been used for over 40 years as an adjunctive treatment for cancer.

Typically an antioxidant at low oral doses, at high intravenous doses Vitamin C acts as a pro-oxidant, killing cancer cells without damaging normal cells. Studies have shown Vitamin C can improve survival by up to 500% in terminally ill patients or give them an additional one year of life.

3.Enzyme therapy

High dose protein-digestive enzymes may be able to digest the protective protein coat around cancer cells that protects them from our immune system's natural defences.

Used in conjunction with a nutritional protocol like the Kelly Protocol - combining easily digestible, alkalinising diets, detoxification and immune support – remarkable success has been claimed with even the most difficult to treat cancers like pancreatic cancer.

4.Hyperthermia

Research has shown that high temperatures can damage or kill cancer cells with minimal injury to normal tissue.

Although it can be used as a stand-alone treatment, studies indicate that best results are achieved when used in combination with chemotherapy or radiotherapy. Heating the body to high temperatures (up to 42 C) can damage the cancer cell proteins, allowing chemotherapy agents to gain better penetration, or increase oxygen delivered to the tumour so that radiotherapy can work more effectively.

5.Low-dose Metronomic Chemotherapy

Whereas traditional chemotherapy attempts (often without success) to eradicate tumour cells with the highest dose possible, Metronomic Chemotherapy uses much lower doses, given regularly, with little of the toxicity experienced in standard doses.

In this way, it appears to work in a whole different way, by inhibiting the cancer cells from growing new blood vessels, and causing them to shrink and sometimes, disappear.

Without the toxic side effects often experienced with standard dose chemotherapy, quality of life is maintained, and because there is no need for long periods of recovery between cycles, drug resistance and resurgence of the cancer is less likely to be a problem.

Still a new novel approach undergoing extensive studies, low-dose Metronomic chemotherapy offers much promise for managing cancer without the usual toxic side effects.

People struggling through cancer are often left floundering and feeling helpless with no control over their lives or their bodies. If they are lucky, they catch it early and do well with standard cancer treatments.

But that's not always the case – if the person develops late-stage cancer, their body takes a beating and they may become progressively weaker and weaker.

Dr. Chan says fighting cancer is harder on patients that it needs to be. "More options to tackle cancer are available than people realise," he says. "They may just need to look outside the box to stand a hope of winning."

Life Clinic
Room 1702, New World Tower 1
16-18 Queen's Road Central
Hong Kong
Tel: 2881 8131
Email: reception@lifeclinic.com.hk
www.lifeclinic.com.hk

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CLINIC