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How to cope with cancer patient's irrational expectations

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Besides the scientific methods of treatment, cancer patients and their relatives are confronted with numerous theoretically unfounded and scientifically unsubstantiated diagnostic and treatment methods. Our patients are threatened by a severe impairment of their physical, psychological and social integrity. As physicians, we cannot leave them on their own in their conflict between scientifically oriented and "alternative" methods of tumour treatment. We must at least be familiar with the principles of the various methods of "alternative" cancer treatment so as to provide satisfactory answers to questions posed by the patients and their relatives.

The majority of patients with curable, but especially with incurable tumour disease often resort to alternative methods. This indicates that these patients have needs that are evidently not met by scientific medicine. Use of these methods must therefore be taken seriously. It impinges on the clinical work of the oncologist, but also on dealing with the individual patient, and is mainly a question of cultural anthropology, sociology and psychology. We are concerned to provide candid, rational and accurate information to patients rather than encouraging them to believe in a miracle.

Sympathetic counselling pointing out the possibilities and limitations of scientifically established potentially curative treatments, but in particular palliative methods of treatment are crucial in maintaining the doctor-patient relationship. This entails a scientifically correct, comprehensible information of the patient and the persons to whom they relate. Concentrating on the prognosis and therapeutic alternatives, it is important to provide information continually and also to discuss unproven methods of treatment.

Besides the optimal application of scientific medicine, we physicians must constantly be concerned to become better partners for our patients. We must be prepared to support the patients in coping with their anxieties. At the same time, an intensive patient-physician relationship which is not oriented exclusively to the disease, but focuses on the patient as a human being is the only possible perspective for optimal medicine, i.e. a medicine that is humane.

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Health-Political and legal dimensions of alternative cancer medicine

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Cancer patients and their relatives are tossed about the appropriate method for promising treatment more than ever before. They wonder whom they can believe, the cautious counsels of the advocates of conventional medicine (CM) or the fullbodied promises of those of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM), mostly non-professionals. More and more people get their information from massmedia or internet. They cannot discern between useful adjuncts and potentially harmful allegedly alternatives. Governmental bodies and cancer associations have several obligations in this respect:

- ~ to protect consumers=patients from fraud and damage
- ~ to provide relevant and understandable information
- ~ to respect freedom of choice
- ~ to take into account new trends and predilections
- ~ to enable to test new potentially useful methods for evidence.

Legal regulation can be solved in three ways

strict: accept only proven methods, prohibit all unproven, prosecute their promoters

liberal: accept apparently harmless methods, even when unproved

mixed: to regulate only officially registered professionals and drugs, leaving everything else to the free disposal and responsibility of the user.

CAM and respective drugs should only be officially accepted or registered if there is clear evidence (level I or II) for activity and harmlessness. Governmental agencies have to handle all CM and CAM the same way for the whole country and take responsibility for consumer protection also in cancer medicine. Better international cooperation is needed.