

When orthodox medicine has nothing more to offer ...

Elizabeth Thompson discusses the role of homeopathic treatment for female cancer patients

At the Glasgow Homeopathic Hospital (GHH) we are seeing an increasing number of people referred with a diagnosis of cancer. This reflects an increased interest in how complementary approaches to cancer care can support people at different stages of the cancer diagnosis. In the past four and a half years of working at the GHH, I have learned that the people coming to the hospital want different things from complementary medicine.

Some people come when conventional treatments can no longer offer them anything to save their lives. This is a frightening time for them and

although the homeopathic approach may not offer a cure at this late stage of their illness, it can often offer hope of a different kind. Sometimes it helps people to outlive the prognosis given to them by months or even years. Sometimes it helps them need less in the way of conventional medicine including pain killers and offers them continuing support despite progressive disease.

As a doctor working in both conventional and complementary cancer care I have learned the importance of integrating these two perspectives. Ideally the doctor practising homeopathy would

work as an integral part of a much wider team which would include family members, nurses, general practitioners, oncologists, surgeons, palliative physicians and other complementary therapists. It is disappointing sometimes to see that other healthcare professionals can be unsupportive of a person's desire to use complementary therapies and for some people the knowledge that the team is not working together can cause doubt and insecurity.

Some patients come at the beginning of their diagnosis wanting to support their bodies with gentler approaches and help themselves recover from some difficult and powerful treatments such as chemotherapy and radiotherapy. As well as using homeopathic medicines, the GHH also has experience in using Mistletoe which is given by injection and has been shown to stimulate the group of white cells whose numbers can be depleted

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Homeopathy can improve menopausal symptoms

during chemotherapy and radiotherapy.

Other patients come when they have finished most of their treatments but may still not be feeling well despite being given the all clear by their doctors.

In the past few months a team of us at the GHH have been carrying out a research study with women who have survived breast cancer but are having difficult menopausal symptoms. These women can not use Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) and many of them are on a drug called Tamoxifen which can make symptoms such as hot flushes a lot worse.

In a pilot study we looked at 45 women all of whom had difficult menopausal symptoms, such as hot flushes, mood disturbance, fatigue and joint pains. All of the women had had a diagnosis of breast cancer. The medical profession is realising that these symptoms can really affect quality of life but conventional approaches

are limited. In particular HRT is not advised (because the hormones in HRT may stimulate breast cancer cells). About three quarters of the women in the study said they had found the homeopathic approach useful for their symptoms and satisfaction with the approach was high. In terms of persuading colleagues within medicine that the homeopathic approach is worth recommending, we can reassure them through research that people gain a benefit which makes a difference to them.

Following on from this pilot study, further research at the GHH, funded by the Trust's Homeopathic Research Committee, is looking at 80 women all of whom have hot flushes and have had a diagnosis of, and conventional treatment for, breast cancer within the last five years. Half of the women will have a consultation plus a placebo (dummy) medicine and half will have a consultation plus a

homeopathic remedy to treat the hot flushes. We know that people can get well again under the influence of a placebo and we are expecting quite a lot of the women on placebo to improve.

Knowing how many women get well with placebo helps us to know how many people we need to see if we wanted to show a difference between placebo medicines and homeopathic medicines and this could be a lot of women. We are grateful to all the women who are taking part and still need another 40 women to join the study.

Research of this sort is very important in helping us to clarify the roles of different complementary medicines in cancer care. The journey of dealing with a serious disease and the consequences of treatment can be a difficult one. I believe that complementary therapies can rise up to meet the person along this road and help restore wellbeing and

Breast Cancer – the facts

- In Britain breast cancer is the single most common cause of all deaths in women under 50 years of age.
- Each year 33,000 women are newly diagnosed with breast cancer.
- About 13,400 women die each year.
- Britain has the highest mortality rate in the world.
- Breast cancer is the commonest cancer among ethnic minority groups.

Breast Cancer Campaign

Raises money to fund research into improving diagnosis and treatment of breast cancer, a better understanding of how it develops and ultimately either curing the disease or preventing it. For a free copy of A Guide to Breast Awareness send an A5 sae to the Breast Cancer Campaign, Stapleton House, 29–33 Scrutton Street, London EC2A 4HU or you can visit their website at www.bcc.uk.org

Breakthrough Breast Cancer

A charity committed to fighting breast cancer through research and awareness supported by Fashion Targets Breast Cancer 2000. For further information on the charity's work call 020 7405 5111.

Breast Care Campaign

For a range of information leaflets send an sae to Blythe Hall, 100 Blythe Road, London W14 0HB or visit their website at www.breastcare.co.uk

Breast Cancer Care

Runs a free helpline staffed by nurses and trained volunteers to give help and advice Monday to Friday 10am to 5pm throughout the year call: 0808 800 6000.

confidence in their own bodies. One wonderful aspect of the homeopathic approach is that it can be a very important opportunity to help someone re-evaluate their life and their health.

Sometimes hurts in the past have never been healed and sitting with someone as they describe difficult experiences can be itself therapeutic. Combining this therapeutic listening time with substances

from nature that gently stimulate the body's own healing potential can be an approach that through patient demand and research we can demonstrate is really worth offering to many more people.



Dr Elizabeth Thompson MRCP MFHom trained in homeopathy with the Homeopathic Physicians Teaching Group in 1992 and began working at the GHH in 1995 seeing patients with cancer in a research clinic. She and her husband, also a Member of the Faculty of Homeopathy, have three young children who thrive on love and homeopathy when necessary!

A 62 year-old woman was referred to outpatients with a diagnosis of hot flushes. She had undergone a left mastectomy for breast cancer in November 1998. She had always had a fear that she might get cancer as her mum had died of it.

She went on to describe the flushes: "They really drain me and take every bit of energy from me. They start in the tummy and come up and then I feel the heat in my face. I also feel depressed and I think a lot about dying. I fear death and I fear getting older. I have lost confidence and I don't like to go into town. I feel everybody is walking into me. I don't go out in the dark and I worry about how I am going to get to my work when it's dark in the morning."

I asked if anything in her life besides the diagnosis might make her fear death. She then told me that as a young girl she had developed diphtheria and other people on her ward had died. In her past medical history she had had problems with her thyroid gland.

She goes back to the flushes. "They waken me at night and I remember my dreams. I dream of a cemetery – it's horrific with skeletons running towards me." She has this dream recurrently.

*I remember a remedy which has this connection with skeletons and I go to my computer which confirms that there is a remedy called *Crotalus cascavella* which might be helpful. This is a snake remedy and homeopaths have used a similar snake remedy called *Lachesis* to help with menopausal symptoms.*

*We are beginning to recognise the connections between different remedies in the same family and although *Crotalus cascavella* is not as well known as *Lachesis* I decide to prescribe *Crotalus cascavella*, the Brazilian Rattlesnake. Preparing the venom of the snake homeopathically makes it very safe to administer.*

Within days of taking the remedy, this woman felt her flushes subsiding. She also began to gain more confidence and was able to report that she no longer felt so frightened in the dark and had managed to go back to work. A year later she is feeling very well and in some respects better than she did before her diagnosis of cancer.



case study