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Helping cancer patients make informed choices

BC Cancer launches service to provide information about how to integrate non-traditional medicine with conventional treatments safely

When 30-year old North Vancouver resident Adam Lambert was diagnosed with cancer in his leg last year, one of the first things he did was seek advice from a trusted naturopath about complementary therapies to boost his immune system and aid his recovery from surgery, chemotherapy and radiation.

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Cancer survivor Adam Lambert with a variety of products recommended by a naturopath.

The naturopath recommended plenty of different vitamins, minerals, homeopathic remedies and acupuncture, all of which Lambert, a carpenter in the film industry, used with full satisfaction, and some of which he continues to use.

Lambert's oncologist at the BC Cancer Agency supported his decision to use such therapies as long as he was fully open with her about what he was doing.

He was advised not to take certain nutritional supplements on days after his chemotherapy treatment, to ensure they didn't interfere with the way his body metabolized the chemo drugs. He said he was also advised against eating grapefruit and strawberries while he was having his chemotherapy because of possible interactions.

It's estimated that up to 70 per cent of cancer patients use some form of complementary medicine (CAM). When about 400 B. C. patients were surveyed about it last year, the majority voiced concerns about not getting enough information to make informed decisions on what else they could take, use or do, along with conventional treatment like surgery, chemotherapy and radiation.

On Tuesday, the cancer agency tried to redress that by launching a new service offering group education sessions and one-on-one sessions. The Complementary Medicine Education and Outcomes Program (CAMEO) is said to be the first of its kind in Canada. It will guide both patients and health professionals in making informed decisions about how to integrate complementary medicine with conventional cancer care, safely and effectively.

Through a collaboration between the cancer agency and the University of B. C. School of Nursing, information-seeking patients will get the latest, unbiased, credible evidence about complementary medicines from a handful of nurses and other experts. They will not endorse anything nor will they make recommendations. Instead, patients will get the straight goods on the evidence available for each type of therapy.

CAM is generally defined as diverse health care practices and products that are offered by allied health professionals. It includes such things as physical therapy, mind-body therapies like meditation, naturopathic medicine, energy medicine such as reiki and therapeutic touch, acupuncture, chiropractic medicine, homeopathy traditional Chinese medicine, Ayurvedic medicine and first nations traditional healing.

Complementary medicine is used with conventional medicine while alternative medicine may be used in place of conventional medicine. The CAMEO program intends to emphasize complementary, rather than alternative medicine.

Lynda Balneaves, an associate professor of nursing at UBC, is the principal investigator in the CAMEO program, which has received a major financial boost with a \$1-million grant over four years from the Lotte and John Hecht Memorial Foundation, along with additional support from the Canadian Breast Cancer Research Alliance and the Canadian Institutes of Health Research.

Balneaves said in an interview Tuesday that the mandate of the program is to educate patients about evidence, benefits and potential risks of complementary therapies.

"With cancer patients, the general rule around CAM is that if you are going to consume or ingest anything you should have a discussion with your health providers about that," she said, adding there are pharmacists at the cancer agency who are well informed about potential interactions. Herbs like St. John's Wort, for example, taken for depression, might have a negative effect on the intended action of chemotherapy drugs.

CAMEO will also conduct research. In one project, active ingredients in pomegranate juice will be studied to determine if they have a beneficial effect on men undergoing prostate gland removal. Balneaves said researchers want to know if the compounds in the fruit help limit cancer cell growth.

Lambert says if the program had existed when he was diagnosed with his sarcoma last year, he'd have jumped at the opportunity to use it. "I was fortunate to have loved ones and other people guide me but I absolutely would have used the CAMEO services. It's a program that's going to be very useful for many patients because there are a lot of people who don't have that kind of knowledge at their disposal."

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