

A New Frontier for Evidence-Informed Integrative Oncology Care

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Integrative medicine uses an evidence-informed approach to bring together conventional and complementary health approaches in support of patient health. According to the 2012 National Health Interview Survey, adults with chronic health conditions reported more frequent use of complementary and alternative medicine than did those without chronic health conditions.¹ Comparing 2012 results with those from the 2017 National Health Interview Survey, there is a continued increase in use of complementary health approaches by adults in the United States, with the greatest increase in meditation use from 4.1% to 14.2%.² In oncology care, estimates of complementary and alternative medicine use rises to close to 80%. The challenge lies in how patients can learn about the safe, evidence-informed use of complementary health approaches during their cancer journey. Some individuals have been using complementary and alternative medicine throughout their lives. For others, it is a recent discovery as they seek information about how to best support their health and manage symptoms during their cancer treatment and into survivorship. Integrative oncology becomes a critical component of evidence-informed, patient-centered cancer care, helping patients and their families navigate the complexity of their medical situation and the mixed quality of the information available to guide them.

In the article that accompanies this commentary, Latte-Naor and Mao³ provide insight into how an integrative oncology framework can help patients, families, and health care professionals work together to achieve health goals that range from symptom management to support for lifestyle changes. Too often, there is a lack of understanding about the difference between integrative and alternative medicine. As Latte-Naor and Mao note, where alternative medicine approaches are offered to patients in place of conventional care, integrative oncology uses the best available evidence to offer complementary health approaches alongside conventional cancer care. Recent guidelines published in collaboration between American Society of Clinical Oncology and the Society for Integrative Oncology highlight how the best available evidence can be used to inform patient care strategies that incorporate integrative oncology.⁴ In line with a greater understanding of the benefits of

integrative oncology, National Comprehensive Cancer Network guidelines also include a number of complementary health approaches as part of clinical care pathways for the management of symptoms, such as pain, nausea, and distress.

Although we learn about how communication on integrative oncology is part of a patient-centered approach that can help empower patients, where should these discussions take place and with whom? Latte-Naor and Mao³ describe how several large cancer centers have already put into practice clinical programs using an integrative oncology approach. With such centers offering counseling on a number of topics, including herb/supplement use, and offering therapeutic interventions, such as acupuncture, oncology massage, and healthy lifestyle counseling, the challenge lies in how to best integrate such interventions into conventional supportive care pathways. In a recent study of women with breast cancer, we learned that use of complementary and alternative medicine was associated with decreased initiation of clinically indicated chemotherapy, bringing attention to the importance of having timely discussions on this topic.⁵ In addition, it is important that patients seek qualified providers to guide them regarding integrative oncology decision making. With national and international efforts to develop core competencies for integrative oncology underway, there will be more opportunities to educate oncology care providers on how to have effective discussions with patients and families on these topics.^{6,7}

What are the next steps in successfully putting integrative oncology into practice? Latte-Naor and Mao³ suggest the importance of having institutional support for such initiatives and patient challenges with regard to the lack of awareness and insurance coverage for these interventions. Their review also presents an algorithm for facilitating decision making. With the development of well-defined clinical care pathways in integrative oncology care delivery, there will be greater opportunities for collaborative research to expand the evidence base and create a standard for high-quality, integrative oncology care. There are also unique opportunities to partner with current broader cancer care initiatives, such as safety, patient experience/satisfaction, and use of adjunctive nonpharmacologic approaches for pain management.⁸

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It is our responsibility as health care professionals to create a supportive environment for counseling regarding integrative oncology and to offer patients and families the best opportunity to support their health during their cancer

journey. If we are not prepared to address these questions, there is the potential for increased dissatisfaction with conventional care and possible harm as patients seek the guidance of uninformed and/or alternative providers.

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AUTHOR'S DISCLOSURES OF POTENTIAL CONFLICTS OF INTEREST AND DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

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AUTHOR'S DISCLOSURES OF POTENTIAL CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

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