

Homeopathy and Cancer – Real Benefits or Empty Promises?

When veterinary clients hear that their animal has cancer, questions race through their minds. Questions such as: How much will treatment cost? How bad are the side effects? What are the alternatives? What's the best way to treat my animal? Is there any hope?

Naturally, considering how often human cancer patients seek alternative health care, veterinary clients hunger for safe and effective options that would allow them to circumvent conventional and risky cancer treatments or at least lessen their side effects. They may be disappointed to learn that currently no alternative therapies constitute proven, effective cures for cancer, although many natural products show promise. Alternative treatment providers who claim to offer cures for cancer may be considered unethical for several reasons. Delaying conventional and proven treatments may hasten an animal's death and turn what was potentially curable, incurable. In fact, a Pakistani study showed that 36% of human cancer patients tried homeopathy before seeking conventional care, risking late presentation and a worse outcome. Providing false hopes can lead to cruel disappointments and financial exploitation.

Focusing instead on complementary medical techniques for palliative care, one can find substantial and growing evidence (albeit in humans) for a variety of techniques that help reduce the pain, anxiety, and stress resulting from chemotherapy and radiation. Potentially effective techniques include massage, aromatherapy, Reiki, therapeutic touch, acupuncture, and homeopathy. Physical medicine techniques such as massage and acupuncture may be more readily embraced by practitioners than those approaches asserting mechanisms of action based on balancing energies and clearing auras such as Reiki and therapeutic touch.

Homeopathy is another method conceptually difficult for scientifically oriented practitioners to grasp. Homeopathic remedies exist in moderate to extremely dilute concentrations, wherein the homeopathic solution is nearly pure water, yet supposedly these products can rectify symptom pictures which in larger concentrations they would produce. In other words, "Like cures like." For example, a homeopathic preparation of a bee would treat a similar symptom picture of redness, swelling, and pain.

As difficult as homeopathic theory is to swallow, the remedies are as easy to administer as sugar pills. This is because, for many remedies, the pills are just that: lactose tablets impregnated on the outer surface with the diluted homeopathic mixture. Most remedies are available over the counter. Although most states (except Georgia) consider the practice of homeopathy on animals as part of veterinary medicine, clients can and do self-prescribe and self-administer

the medication to their animals. Several do-it-yourself books on veterinary homeopathy are available.

Perhaps surprisingly, homeopathy is amassing an increasing amount of evidence of benefit in palliating patients with cancer. For example, in 2000, the *British Homeopathy Journal* published an article reporting that radiation patients participating in a randomized, double-blind, placebo controlled clinical trial who received homeopathic “X-ray” and homeopathic Belladonna derived statistically significant benefits in skin color, heat, swelling, and pigmentation, compared to those ingesting placebo.

Researchers in a 2004 article in *Homeopathy* took a more classical homeopathic approach to radiation reactions, and instead of giving the same remedy to everyone, gave each of twenty-five patients a remedy tailored to their symptoms. In this study, the most commonly indicated remedy (according to homeopathic “repertorization”) for radiation-induced itching was Fluoric acid, in a 30C dilution. [A 30C dilution means that 1 drop of Fluoric acid was added to 99 drops of an alcohol-water mixture, agitated and diluted in this manner 29 more times.] The rationale here was that a homeopathic dose of fluoric acid will treat what dermal exposure to full-strength fluoric acid would cause: deep destruction of skin and underlying tissues.

A randomized, double-blind, placebo-controlled clinical trial receiving much attention is a 2001 investigation reported in *Cancer*. This study involved administering a homeopathic remedy (Traumeel S®) to children undergoing stem cell transplantation for either lymphoma or acute myelogenous leukemia, who developed with chemotherapy-induced stomatitis. Traumeel S® is an over-the-counter homeopathic product containing highly diluted (10^{-1} to 10^{-9}) solutions of fourteen plants and minerals. It has a long history of use for trauma, inflammation, and degenerative processes. Patients received standard oral care in addition to placebo or Traumeel S®. Thirty-three percent of Traumeel S® patients were able to avoid developing stomatitis, versus only seven percent in the placebo group. Stomatitis worsened in forty-seven percent of the individuals receiving Traumeel S®, as compared to ninety-three percent worsening in the placebo group. The benefits of Traumeel S® were statistically significant.

Adverse effects from the homeopathic remedies themselves are few, and mainly involve symptom aggravation. Seventeen percent of patients in a prospective observation study reported in *Palliative Medicine* in 2002 experienced transient worsening of symptoms while receiving homeopathy, but problems abated after stopping the remedy. Symptom aggravation may reflect a healing process according to some homeopaths, who embrace these “healing crises” (i.e., serious aggravations) as treatment breakthroughs and signs of impending improvement. On the other hand, symptom aggravation might merely mean that the condition is worsening, either because of disease progression or due to the treatment.

Homeopaths have thus far published little on the effectiveness of highly diluted chemical carcinogens to treat cancer, although one homeopath has claimed “complete remission or life extension” in anecdotal accounts. In this report, the homeopathics contained ultra-low doses (1×10^{-10} to 10^{-12} molar) of chemical carcinogens given for 3-24 months. [Montfort H. A new homeopathic approach to neoplastic diseases: from cell destruction to carcinogen-induced apoptosis. *Br Homeopath J.* 2000 Apr;89(2):78-83.]

Will homeopathy work for animals? That is unknown as zero methodologically sound studies exist for the application of homeopathy in animal patients with cancer. Additional questions remain: Could ultra-high dilutions of chemotherapy agents treat, in a typical homeopathic fashion, the negative side effects of these compounds? That is, would homeopathic 5-fluorouracil treat the stomatitis it induces as well as Traumeel S®? Furthermore, could homeopathic doses of neurotoxic chemotherapeutics treat nerve impairments from other causes? Answering these and other questions would help to further demystify the value of homeopathy as a medical technique, even if the mechanism of action remains obscure for decades to come.