

Internet Oncology: Cure Seekers Beware!

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When faced with the fear of death, either your own or that of a loved one, what would you do? How desperately would you seek a cure? Would you be tempted to try one of the many unproven therapies promising a cancer cure? We are educated health-care professionals, yet how many of us have tried the newest abs buster, wrinkle remover, or diet fad?

Patients are bombarded daily with cure guarantees: cures with “no side effects” that are “safe” and “natural.” “Internet oncology” is available to anyone with a computer. A Google search for “cancer cure” produces over 2 million links. And 16 of the first 18 sites promote unproven cancer treatments.

The Internet has become our virtual library, our worldwide supermarket, the local bank and business center, our entertainment Mecca, and our favorite social gathering place. The Internet may now take the place of the health-care professional, and the Internet makes house calls! Unfortunately, the average person does not have the ability to discern what medical information is evidence-based and what is garbage. As oncology health-care

professionals, it is part of our professional duty to protect our patients and the public from charlatans and snake-oil salesmen.

There are resources that will assist us in protecting our patients and the public. Patients experience information overload when they are diagnosed with cancer. They are deluged with advice and recommendations not only from their health-care providers, but also from well-meaning family and friends, advertisements, and those who seek to profit from our patients’ natural fears.

As the patients’ advocate, we can help them weed through the vast information assaulting them. We must first teach them how to critically assess the source of medical information, particularly the Internet websites. The Federal Trade Commission (FTC), the American Cancer Society (ACS), and the National Cancer Institute (NCI) all offer resources for determining a source’s credibility (Table 1). The FTC website (www.ftc.gov) offers consumers short videos discussing warning signs of cancer treatment scams and questions to discuss with health-care providers.

What Patients Should Know About CAM

Many patients are seeking complementary and alterna-

tive medicine (CAM) and treatment. Studies have shown as many as 50% to 90% of patients undergoing conventional treatment also report using at least one form of CAM (Mao, Palmer, Healy, Desai, & Amsterdam, 2011; Naing et al., 2011; Yates et al., 2005). But more than half of these patients do not discuss the use of CAM with their health-care provider (Mao et al., 2011; Oh et al., 2010; Yates et al., 2005; Yildirim, 2010).

We must ask ourselves (and the patient) what it is they are seeking. What are they NOT getting from traditional medicine and their practitioners? What has been their experience with traditional medicine in the past? Is there fear of conventional therapy? There are many myths about chemotherapy, surgery, and radiation therapy. Are certain side effects of their current treatment not being effectively managed? Are they experiencing loss of control over their lives and health? Do they desire a practitioner with a more personal touch? Do they prefer a less (or more) paternalistic approach? Is there a loss of trust between patient and their current provider? Communication, the most important aspect of establishing a trust relationship between patient and pro-

Table 1. Resources for Appraising a Source’s Credibility

FTC: How to Find Health Information Online
www.ftc.gov/bcp/edu/microsites/whocares/health.shtm

ACS: Cancer Information on the Internet
<http://www.cancer.org/Cancer/CancerBasics/cancer-information-on-the-internet>

NCI: Evaluating Health Information on the Internet
<http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/factsheet/Information/internet>

Note. ACS = American Cancer Society; FTC = Federal Trade Commission; NCI = National Cancer Institute.

Table 2. Resources for Filing Complaints About Fraudulent Health-Care Claims

Federal Trade Commission	www.ftc.gov
To file a complaint	https://www.ftccomplaintassistant.gov/
US Food and Drug Administration	www.fda.gov
To report unlawful internet sales	http://www.fda.gov/Safety/ReportaProblem/ucm059315.htm
To report problems with FDA-regulated products	http://www.fda.gov/Safety/ReportaProblem/ConsumerComplaintCoordinators/default.htm
Your State Attorney General	
For victims of consumer fraud. The website of the National Association of Attorneys General links to each state’s Attorney General.	www.naag.org
American Cancer Society	www.cancer.org
To report fraud or abuse	http://www.cancer.org/AboutUs/WhoWeAre/Governance/report-fraud-or-abuse 1-800-539-7202

vider, is critical for patient satisfaction (Frenkel, Ben-Arye, & Cohen, 2010).

When patients consider CAM, there are resources that will provide information about the safety and efficacy of certain treatments. It is helpful to understand the role of two key government agencies. One is the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA). The FDA ensures that any medicinal product has

been thoroughly researched and can “prove” that it does what the manufacturer claims it can do in terms of treating a specific illness or condition. Nutritional products and supplements are exempt from this rigorous process, and manufacturers of these cannot claim their products prevent, treat, or cure any disease. To make such claims is a violation of federal law.

The FTC is another governmental agency that protects consumers. Part of the FTC’s role is to protect the consumer from unfair or deceptive business practices as in advertising

or marketing. The FTC investigates false advertising and other forms of fraud. These agencies, as well as each state’s State Attorney General, offer consumers recourse when they have been defrauded. During your consultations with patients, you may find that certain CAM make false or misleading claims. Table 2 gives information about whom to contact in cases such as these.

It is extremely easy to purchase herbals, nutritional supplements, and vitamins either online or in stores. It is important that we ask patients at every visit about their CAM usage and document this information. There are resources for learning about alternative compounds



Use your smartphone to access the patient education sheet mentioned in this article.

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Table 3. Resources for the Safe Use of Herbals, Supplements, and Vitamins**American Cancer Society**

Guidelines for using complementary and alternative medicine	http://www.cancer.org/Treatment/TreatmentsandSideEffects/ComplementaryandAlternativeMedicine/guidelines-for-using-complementary-and-alternative-methods
If you are thinking about buying drugs online	http://www.cancer.org/Treatment/FindingandPayingforTreatment/ManagingInsuranceIssues/PrescriptionDrugAssistancePrograms/prescription-drug-assistance-programs-buying-drugs-online?docSelected=prescription-drug-assistance-programs-intro
Dietary supplements: How to know what is safe	http://www.cancer.org/Treatment/TreatmentsandSideEffects/ComplementaryandAlternativeMedicine/DietarySupplements/dietary-supplements-choosing-safely

US Food and Drug Administration

Buying medications over the Internet	http://www.fda.gov/Drugs/ResourcesForYou/Consumers/BuyingUsingMedicineSafely/BuyingMedicinesOvertheInternet/default.htm
Buying medicine from outside the United States	http://www.fda.gov/Drugs/ResourcesForYou/Consumers/BuyingUsingMedicineSafely/BuyingMedicinefromOutsidetheUnitedStates/default.htm

Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center

Searchable database of herbs, botanicals, and vitamins	http://www.mskcc.org/mskcc/html/11570.cfm
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National Cancer Institute: MedlinePlus

Searchable database of drugs, supplements, and herbs	http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/druginformation.html
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Handbook of integrative oncology nursing: Evidence-based practice. Decker, G. & Lee, C. (2010). Pittsburgh, PA: Oncology Nursing Society.	http://www.ons.org/publications/books/excerpts/INPU0569intro
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(see Table 3). If not familiar with a product, ask the patient to bring in the bottle or box so that you can view and record the ingredient list. Many products are actually combinations of various herbs and vitamins and nutritional substances. Most of these will not interfere with conventional medical treatments; however, there are some that can affect the efficacy of treatment. An example of this is an antioxidant vitamin, like vitamin C, which can interfere with the effectiveness of some chemotherapy agents and radiation therapy.

Another potential area where our patients may be scammed and possibly harmed

Table 4. Information on Unproven Methods of Treatment

FDA: 187 Fake Cancer Cures	http://www.fda.gov/Drugs/GuidanceComplianceRegulatoryInformation/EnforcementActivitiesbyFDA/ucm171057.htm
MythBusters	www.mythbusters.com
Snopes	www.snopes.com
Quackwatch	www.quackwatch.org

is buying prescription medications online. Table 3 also offers some resources to assist patients in identifying potential risks. Buying medications from other countries could also be a potential source of danger to our patients; we must be alert to this practice, especially if patients

are financially disadvantaged.

There are many myths and urban legends about cancer, its cause, and treatments. E-mail scares are forwarded daily about the latest “cause” of cancer or “what the government is not telling you.” Some of these myths may inhibit or

Table 5. Health Fraud and Fake Charities

Charity Navigator: Searchable database of charities	www.charitynavigator.org
FDA: Health Fraud Awareness	http://www.fda.gov/ForConsumers/ProtectYourself/HealthFraud/default.htm
FDA: Health Scams	http://www.fda.gov/ForConsumers/ByAudience/ForWomen/FreePublications/ucm137080.htm
FDA: Beware of Online Fraud	http://www.fda.gov/ForConsumers/ConsumerUpdates/ucm048383.htm
FTC CURE-ious	http://www.ftc.gov/bcp/edu/microsites/curious/index.shtml
NCI: Cancer Fund-Raising Organizations	http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/factsheet/Information/organizations
Internet Scambusters	www.scambusters.org

Note. FDA = US Food and Drug Administration; NCI = National Cancer Institute.

delay effective cancer treatments. Mythbuster sites such as Quackwatch offer assistance in dispelling these untruths. Table 4 lists some mythbuster sites. The FDA has a list of 187 different fake cancer cures. These resources allow you or your patient to refute these fear-creating rumors.

Charitable Giving

During a diagnosis of cancer, there is a heightened awareness of the disease. It is not unusual

for family and friends to rally around the person with cancer and want to support them. One way many show their support is by making contributions to various cancer charities or organizations. Yet even then, one must be wary of scam artists. For example, in June 2011, the New York Attorney General filed a lawsuit against the Coalition Against Breast Cancer which solicited millions of dollars from the public, but spent less than 4% on any charitable program

(New York Office of the Attorney General, 2011). Table 5 provides resources that provide information on savvy charitable giving and health-care fraud. One resource, Charity Navigator (www.charitynavigator.org), provides a searchable database of charities and offers information about a charity's financial health. This site also rates the charitable institution on a four-star scale for its overall solvency.

As oncology advanced practitioners, it is part of our professional responsibility to protect our patients. Visit www.advancedpractitioner.com to download a handout that can be utilized in educating your patients about how to avoid potentially costly and dangerous cancer fraud. We can help dispel fearful myths that might inhibit our patients' successful treatment. We can guide them to resources that will empower their decision-making processes. And we can help the public make wise decisions about their financial donations to further oncology care.

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