



Research Article

PERSPECTIVES OF ALTERNATIVE THERAPISTS REGARDING COMPLEMENTARY AND
ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE AND ITS USE IN CANCER

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received 14th August, 2021

Received in revised form 29th
September, 2021

Accepted 05th October, 2021

Published online 28th November, 2021

Key words:

Alternative Therapists;
Complementary and Alternative
Medicine (CAM); Holistic Approach.

ABSTRACT

Background: In recent years, use of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) has increased with growing incidence of chronic and incurable diseases. Better understanding regarding benefits and mechanisms of CAM use in cancer is desired. **Objective:** 1) to explore perceptions and beliefs of alternative therapists concerning practice of CAM. 2) To investigate benefits and mechanism of practicing CAM in cancer by them. 3) To suggest holistic approach of cancer management by health care providers. **Methodology:** Qualitative survey was conducted among selected alternative therapists practicing Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) in different fields from different states of the country. Their opinions, perceptions and beliefs regarding CAM use were explored by conducting personal interviews using semi-structured interview schedules. Study variables included knowledge, perceptions, and perceived benefits of practicing CAM in cancer. **Results:** Among 244 alternative therapists, awareness of Ayurvedic treatment was found 87.7% followed by 71.3% awareness of Homeopathy. Awareness of spiritual therapy/ faith healing was among 152 (62.3%) therapists. The most common point in favor of CAM was having no side effects (77.5%) followed by close to nature (66.0%). The most common argument in favor of usefulness in CAM in cancer was observed that CAM improves/builds the immune of the patient (25.0%) followed by that CAM therapies subside the side effects without any side effect (14.3%). There were 161(66.0%) respondents who were of the opinion that CAM therapies should be practiced along with allopathic medicines and 131(53.7%) were of the opinion that CAM therapies should be practiced with dietary advice and Yoga. High toxicity of traditional/conventional therapies came out to be the most common shortcoming of those therapies, favoring use of alternative therapies among cancer patients. There were 216(88.5%) respondents who were in favour of scientific evaluation of CAM therapies. **Conclusions and Suggestions:** The study reported large gaps existing in faith and practices of CAM even among alternative therapists except for Tibetan System of Medicine. The study provided perceived supportive evidence in favor of CAM in general based on opinions of alternative therapists. Shortcomings of conventional treatment resulted in popularity of CAM use as reported by alternative therapists, but not so strong evidence of role of CAM for treating cancer patients. Alternative therapists favored using CAM with allopathic treatment suggesting thereby a holistic approach of cancer management. There is a need of continuous scientific evaluation of beneficial effects of CAM therapies. Further in depth epidemiological studies should be conducted for better understanding the role of CAM in cancer.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, use of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) has increased with growing incidence of chronic and incurable diseases. The exact reasons for the popularity of CAM are complex, varying with time, space and also from therapy to therapy. No single determinant of the present popularity of complementary and alternative medicine exists. Practices of CAM are not part of conventional medicine because there is insufficient evidence of safety and efficacy of such therapies. Alternative medicine is often defined as any healing practice "that does not fall within the realm of conventional medicine.¹ Alternative therapy is nonstandard treatment used in place of traditional methods/ standard

medical treatments. It is frequently grouped with complementary medicine or integrative medicine, which generally refers to the same interventions when used in conjunction with mainstream techniques under the umbrella term 'complementary and alternative medicine.'^{2,3} Alternative therapies are generally used in place of conventional medicine based on historical or cultural traditions, rather than a scientific basis. The American National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine(NCCAM) defines CAM as a group of diverse medical and health care systems, practices, and products that are not generally considered part of conventional medicine and cites examples including Naturopathy, Chiropractic Medicine, Herbalism, Traditional Chinese

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Medicine and others.⁴ A few studies are available on opinions of alternative therapists regarding CAM. Views of CAM practitioners on CAM in case of chronic low back pain are available.⁵ Providers indicated they manage their patients' expectations in a number of domains-roles and responsibilities of providers and patients, treatment outcomes, timeframe for improvement, and treatment experience.⁶

Opinions of cancer patients regarding CAM, spirituality and holistic care are available in our earlier papers.^{7,8} However, there is a paucity of research on views of alternative therapist and CAM practitioners on these aspects particularly in case of cancer. Practitioners' willingness to acknowledge that patients are seeking CAM is often based on their own professional and personal experience with therapies.⁹ Better understanding of opinions of alternative therapists and responses to their patients' expectations are very important research areas. Present study was conducted with the objectives:

Objectives

1. To explore perceptions and beliefs of alternative therapists concerning practice of CAM.
2. To investigate benefits and mechanism of practicing CAM in cancer by them.
3. To suggest holistic approach of cancer management by health care providers.

METHODS

Information concerning qualitative aspects was collected from alternative therapists providing CAM to cancer patients. They were interviewed for collecting their background information and their views in depth regarding several aspects of CAM. Their opinions, perceptions and beliefs regarding CAM in cancer cure were explored by conducting personal interviews using semi-structured interview schedules. Study variables included knowledge, perceptions, and perceived reliefs, cost-effectiveness of alternative therapies, perceived benefits, positive and negative motivations concerning CAM, misunderstandings/ misconceptions regarding cancer therapies and CAM, reasons behind popularity of CAM use.

Information was collected using semi-structured interview schedule. Questionnaires/schedules were filled by interview method asking questions in local/understandable language. Only participants giving consent were included as per the Ethical guidelines. Both quantitative and qualitative surveys were conducted. Content analysis of responses was done and results were expressed using frequencies and percentages in the form of frequency tables. Focus Group Discussions (FGD) were also organized to collect opinions of CAM therapists on varied topics concerning CAM use. Prior approval by Institutional Ethics Committee (IEC) was granted to conduct the study.

Statistical Analysis

Data sets were described by using absolute numbers and percentages. Qualitative data were coded by using content analysis. Data analysis was carried out by using SPSS -25.0 Software.

RESULTS

For the purpose of seeking opinions of Health Care Providers practicing different therapies for treating cancer they were interviewed exploring their views on different aspects of alternative therapies. The group consisted of total 244 CAM

providers including 209 (85.7%) practitioners having some professional degrees whereas remaining 35(14.3%) were not having any professional degree. Out of 244 therapists, 121(49.6%) were experts from Ayurvedic and 54(22.1%) were Homeopathic Practitioners and 42(17.2%) Experts from Tibetan System of Medicine also represented the group. 49.6% were Ayurvedic, 22.1% homeopathic and 17.2% from Tibetan System of Medicine (TSM) practitioners. There were 112(45.9%) private practitioners while 57(23.4%) were attached to some Govt. Institutions. There were 148(60.7%) males and 96(39.3%) females. Maximum providers were belonging to the age group 36-45 years and 11 (4.5%) were of age 60 years and above and overall mean age of respondents was found to be 39.8 ±11.6 years. There were 215 (88.1%) married respondents belonging mostly to Hindu religion (68.9%).

Table- 1 presents awareness, practice and faith of CAM Providers in different therapies. Awareness of Ayurvedic treatment was found to be 87.7% which was maximum followed by 71.3% awareness of Homeopathy. Against 87.7% awareness of Ayurvedic treatment, 75.4% respondents were having faith in it while 130 (53.3%) of those aware in Ayurvedic therapy were practicing it. Among those aware of Homeopathy 119(48.8%) were having faith and only 67(27.5%) were practicing it. Awareness of spiritual therapy/faith healing was found to be among 152(62.3%) respondents while 115(47.1%) were having faith in it and 65(26.6%) were practicing it. There was no gap existing between awareness, faith and practice of Tibetan System of Medicine (TSM) and all these rates were found to be 17.2%. Awareness of some other therapies like music therapy, aroma therapy, hormone therapy etc were also reported among 141(57.8%) respondents and 112 (45.9%) were having faith in those other therapies and practice rate among all 244 respondents was found to be 36.5% for such therapies.

Some arguments in favor of CAM perceived by alternative therapists are presented in Table-2. Respondents also provided their opinions regarding perceived benefits of CAM. The most common point in favor of CAM was having no side effects (77.5%) followed by close to nature (66.0%) and taking care of health requirements of people (50.0%), more efficacy (48.8%) and easy availability (44.3%) were also among positive notions in favor of CAM. Against the usual assumption of low cost involved in CAM therapies, only 97(39.8%) were of the opinion that these therapies are inexpensive. According to 123 (50.4%) of all respondents the average monthly cost of CAM ranges upto Rs 5000 and 214(87.7%) respondents considered CAM as inexpensive. Only 9.0% CAM providers were of the opinion that no modern medicine exists for cancer among 31(12.7%) CAM providers reporting miscellaneous advantages of CAM, 29.0 % were of the opinion that it is a supportive treatment and help in managing associated problems. High toxicity of conventional treatment was the most common shortcoming reported by 194(79.5%) CAM providers followed by developing resistance with conventional treatments reported by 119(48.8%) and impairing quality of life reported by 104(42.6%) respondents. Various other shortcomings were also reported by 43(17.6%) respondents. There were 216(88.5%) respondents who were in favour of scientific evaluation of CAM therapies.

Table 1 Respondents By Awareness Practice And Faith In Cam

Therapies Aware, Faith & Practice	Aware		Faith		Practice	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Ayurvedic	214	87.7	184	75.4	130	53.3
Unani	109	44.7	48	19.7	21	8.6
Siddha	93	38.1	42	17.2	12	4.9
Homeopathic	174	71.3	119	48.8	67	27.5
Naturopathy/ herbal	166	68.0	124	50.8	67	27.5
Acupuncture/ acupressure	133	54.5	71	29.1	35	14.3
Psychological therapy/ counseling	150	61.5	119	48.8	79	32.4
Spiritual therapy/ prayer/ faith healing	152	62.3	115	47.1	65	26.6
Laughter therapy	101	41.4	60	24.6	29	11.9
Physiotherapy	103	42.2	56	23.0	19	7.8
Yoga/meditation	180	73.8	159	65.2	109	44.7
TSM	42	17.2	42	17.2	42	17.2
Any other	141	57.8	112	45.9	89	36.5

Table 2 Perceptions of Alternative Therapists Regarding Benefits of CAM

Perceived benefits of CAM	No.	%
No side effects	189	77.5
Close to nature	161	66.0
Herbal medicines take care of health requirements of people	122	50.0
More effective	119	48.8
Easily available	108	44.3
Inexpensive	97	39.8
Blessings of God	89	36.5
More reliable	83	34.0
For quick and additional relief	47	19.3
No hope of life left	23	9.4
No modern medicine exists for cancer	22	9.0
As per social tradition	20	8.2
Others	31	12.7
It is a supportive treatment and help in managing associate problems/Its working subtle level with allopathy	09	29.0
Its works with body nature and cure disease from roots	07	22.5
TSM is working with mind, body, soul and relationship	04	12.3
Holistic approach heals from the roots with the help of natural gifts	04	12.3
For satisfaction	03	9.7
Very good therapeutic benefits	02	6.5
No physical torture	02	6.5
Increase will power/Inner state of person is important for his/her well being	02	6.5
Homeopathy corrects internal arrangement of cellular levels and stop spreading of same	02	6.5
It is the natural law of attraction	01	3.2
Play an important role in the detoxification of body	01	3.2
Negligible side effects	01	3.2
Rejuvenates body and mind	02	6.5
Helps to spread prana (oxygen) to cell by pranayam	01	3.2
Short comings of conventional/allopathic treatment	No.	%
Conventional treatments are highly toxic	194	79.5
Conventional treatments develop resistance with course of time	119	48.8
Impair quality of life	104	42.6
Any other	43	17.6
Any other (N=43)		
Expensive therapy	12	27.9
Side effects are severe	09	20.9
It cures only physical condition and external changes	04	9.3
Depressing atmosphere of hospital	02	4.7
It doesn't give permanent cure	02	4.7
Not 100% curable	02	4.7
Patient becomes weak	01	2.3
Allopathic also has its limitations	01	2.3
Conventional don't treat the disease from roots	01	2.3
Conventional doctors aren't dedicated	01	2.3
CAM therapies should be evaluated scientifically		
Yes	216	88.5
No	25	10.2
No response	3	1.2

Among all 244 CAM providers interviewed in the study, The most common argument in favor of usefulness in CAM therapies in cancer was observed to be “they improves/built the immune of the patient” (25.0%) followed by “to subside the side effects without any side effect” (14.3%) as shown in Table-3. There were 233 (95.5%) respondents who were aware of mechanism of acting CAM in cancer.

Among those who were aware, maximum 61(26.2%) were of the opinion that these therapies improve the quality of life with no side effects followed by enhancement in immunity as told by 54(23.2%) respondents. There were 161(66.0%) respondents who were of the opinion that CAM therapies should be practiced along with allopathic medicines and 131(53.7%) were of the opinion that CAM therapies should be practiced with dietary advice and Yoga.

Table 3 Perceived Benefits of Cam Use in Cancer Treatment

Perceived benefits	No	%
Perceived benefits of CAM for cancer treatment (N=244)		
They improves/built the immune of the patient	61	25.0
Subsides the side effects without any side effect	35	14.3
It increases life expectancy, improves quality of life	27	11.1
Recovery of the patient is speedy with CAM methods	27	11.1
It works on the root of the disease	24	9.8
It is a supportive therapy	23	9.4
CAM treatment is pain less	13	5.3
It is a complete medicine and works just like allopathy	10	4.1
It concentrates on the patients not the disease	09	3.7
It can only prevent not cure	07	2.9
Effective the counseling	06	2.6
It creates the heat inside which helps in curing cancer (TMT)	07	2.9
They treat the origin of the disease	03	1.2
CAM helps to reduce or eliminate the disease it self	03	1.2
CAM is not working for curing cancer	02	0.8
Its acts as supplementary medicine along with allopathic treatment	05	2.0
Its work naturally with nature/natural body	04	1.6
Its heals the side effect of chemo	03	1.2
Its cures the disease from roots	05	2.0
No response	18	7.4
Are you aware of mechanism, how CAM therapies act in treating cancer (N=244)		
Yes	233	95.5
No	9	3.7
No response	2	0.8
If yes, In what ways (N=233)		
No side effect and improve the quality of life	61	26.2
Improve immunity	54	23.2
It cure disease from the roots and kill cancer cells	42	18.0
The patient feel comfort and relief from pain and stress	36	15.4
Remove toxicity	14	6.0
Meditation is necessary for being positive life	11	4.7
It boost up the moral value of the patients case the stress and give relaxation in mind	09	3.8
Its depend on the patient's case history	07	3.0
Stimulate self healing power of body	04	1.7
Rejuvenation of body, mind and maintenance of wellbeing	04	1.7
CAM is wholesome medicine and treat every chronic disease too	03	1.3
Treatment process anti-oxidant qualities	03	1.3
It gives result	03	1.3
Its work slowly	02	0.9
It's an holistic healing	02	0.9
These therapies give hope to patient and that hope work in treatment	02	0.9
Only in growth but not in cancer	01	0.4
It is very effective in abdomen related disease	01	0.4
If no, reason for prescribing CAM (N=09)		
CAM has supportive role only not cure	06	66.6
Allopathic treatment is not necessary with CAM	03	33.3
CAM is suitable for other disease not for cancer	03	33.3
No response	02	22.2
Advice for using CAM in cancer (N=244)		
CAM along with allopathic treatment is advisable in treating cancer	208	85.2
CAM with dietary advice and yoga	131	53.7
CAM with dietary advice	66	27.0
As alternative medicine alone	31	12.7
Not to be used with allopathic treatment		
Others	19	7.8
Any other (N=19)		
Depends on patient, disease and stage	05	26.3
Holistic approach should be adopted	01	5.3
It heals individual on all the levels	01	5.3
Depends on the cancer stage and patients approach	03	15.8
To minimize the side effects of allopathy medicine	01	5.3
CAM with dietary advice and life style modification	05	26.3
Various combinations depend in so many factors	01	5.3
It has to be combination of everything	02	10.5
Reason of using CAM along with allopathic treatment (N=208)		
Both have their own advantages for speedy recovery	37	17.8
CAM is supportive and supplementary treatment	28	13.5
For quick and proper treatment, both therapies should be given	25	12.0
Quick relief to the symptoms not the disease	23	11.0
CAM reduces the severity of side effects of radiation & chemotherapy	17	8.1
It depends on the site and the stage	15	7.2
It improves the immune system	15	7.2
Allopath treatment should not be given as it gives side-effects	11	5.3

CAM is a slow process	11	5.3
Allopath kills cancer cells, CAM heals the weak, infected organ and strengthen the body	10	4.8
If patient want to take both therapy, then they can	06	2.9
If allopath treatment is continued then it is prescribed to leave allopathic medicine slowly	03	1.4
Patients feel comfortable and relax	03	1.4
To cover up the side effects of all treatment	02	1.0
Play a role in detoxification of body	02	1.0
It help in healing	02	1.0
For better result	01	0.5
It increases bioavailability	01	0.5
Reason, in case disagree of CAM use with allopathic treatment (N=33)		
CAM is a complete treatment for any disease	14	42.4
Patient comes at last stage	03	9.1
Depends on patient's faith	04	12.1
Allopathic medicine has side effects	03	9.1
Because approach of both is all together different	01	3.0
Cancer is caused because of development of uncontrolled cells in the body that is why only single therapy should be practiced	01	3.0

Only 31(12.7%) CAM providers were in favor of such therapies should be practices as alternative medicine alone. There were 208 (85.2%) CAM providers who desired CAM practice along with allopathic treatment. Mostly because of added advantages and speedy recovery of patients, among those 33 respondents who disagreed 14(42.4%) were of the opinion that CAM provide complete treatment for any disease. Among 9 respondents who were not in favor of this, 6(66.6%) were of the opinion that CAM therapies provides supportive role only and do not provide the cure.

DISCUSSION

This survey was helpful in exploring views of respondents concerning awareness, perceptions and beliefs of alternative therapists practicing different CAM therapies for treating cancer exploring their views on different aspects. The most common argument in favor of CAM was having no side effects (77.5%) followed by close to nature (66.0%) and taking care of health requirements of people (50.0%). More efficacy (48.8%) and easy availability (44.3%) were also among positive notions in favor of CAM. High toxicity of traditional/conventional therapies came out to be the most common shortcoming of those therapies, favoring use of alternative therapies among cancer patients. Various other views advocating as well as discouraging this treatment were also expressed. The most common argument in favor of usefulness in CAM therapies was observed that CAM improves/built the immune of the patient (25.0%) followed by that CAM therapies subside the side effects without any side effect (14.3%).

Efforts have been made in this study incorporating opinions of alternative therapists regarding CAM including Tibetan System of Medicine (TSM) through qualitative in-depth individual interviews and focus group discussions. This study may be beneficial for health planners to have idea regarding popularity of CAM use in cancer without supportive scientific evidence while formulating a policy related with CAM. Treatment guidelines may be suitably modified under Indian situations suggesting a holistic approach to treat cancer patients.

Limitations of Study

In spite of several strengths, present study suffered several limitations.

There is possibility of under representation of some therapies due to reluctance of some alternative therapist practicing in different fields to take part in the study in spite of our best efforts. There is likelihood of biased perceptions of selected therapists towards their respective therapies. It might have resulted sacrificing some valuable insights opinions of CAM providers to be attained through semi-structured interviews and focused group discussions (FGD). More active participation of alternative therapists is desired to attain some logical conclusions.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

The study reported large gaps existing in faith and practices of CAM even among alternative therapists except for Tibetan System of Medicine. The study provided perceived supportive evidence in favour of CAM in general based on opinions of alternative therapists. Shortcomings of conventional treatment resulted in popularity of CAM use as reported by alternative therapists, but not so strong evidence of role of CAM for treating cancer patients. Alternative therapists favoured using CAM with allopathic treatment suggesting thereby a holistic approach of cancer management. There is a need of continuous scientific evaluation of beneficial effects of CAM therapies. Further in depth epidemiological studies should be conducted for better understanding the role of CAM in cancer.

Acknowledgements

Present study is a part of Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), India sponsored project "Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) Use among Cancer Patients". Authors are grateful to Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), New Delhi, India for providing financial assistance. Authors acknowledge the assistance by the ICMR project staff members for their respective contributions.

Conflict of interest: None declared

Ethical approval: The study was approved by the Institutional Ethics Committee Government Medical College and Hospital (GMCH), Chandigarh. Authors acknowledge IEC, GMCH Chandigarh for giving approval.

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How to cite this article:

Dinesh Kumar *et al* (2021) 'Perspectives of Alternative Therapists Regarding Complementary and Alternative Medicine and its Use in Cancer', *International Journal of Current Medical and Pharmaceutical Research*, 07(11), pp 6018-6023.
