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A History of Alternative Cancer Cures

The Greek physician Hippocrates, known today as the “Father of Medicine,” was the first to advocate natural remedies and holistic approaches to treating illness in the fourth century, B.C.

Centuries later, the scientific revolution of the 17th century marked the decline of holistic approaches, as advances in anatomical and physiological science revealed the separation of mind and body as they relate to physical illness. But alternative approaches to traditional medicine continued into the 19th century, which became known as the golden age of quackery, summed up by an anonymous physician who said in the *National Quarterly Review* in 1861: “Quackery kills a larger number annually of the citizens of the United States than all the diseases it pretends to cure.” Doctors today remain concerned about patients looking to unorthodox medicine.

Early 1800s

The theory that all disease results from cold and can be cured with heat, known as Thomsonianism, gains a major following. The theory promotes emetics and hot baths.

1825

Homeopathy is introduced in the United States with its similia principle, or “like cures like,” that involves giving extremely diluted agents to sick patients that would produce the same or similar symptoms of illness if given in undiluted doses to healthy people.

1890

Naturopathy gains popularity for the belief that disease results from violation of the natural laws of living and can therefore be cured once a healthy internal environment is achieved. The method involves diet, massage and manipulation of the body.

Early 1900s

Quasimedicals in pill and liquid form are touted as cancer cures and include Chamlee’s Cancer-Specific Purifies-the-Blood Cure, Radol, Cancerol, BF Bye cancer cure and many others.

1920s

The electronic age of radio, telegraph and telephone, leads to a belief in energy cancer cures, such as cosmic energy treatment and light therapy.

1930s

Gerson therapy, named after Max Gerson, MD, is introduced as a treatment for tuberculosis and is later used to treat cancer. Dr. Gerson published *A Cancer*

Therapy in the late 1950s, shortly before his death. Now banned from use in the United States, the “metabolic” therapy is based on the notion that cancer results from the accumulation of toxins and claims to detoxify the body with diet, coffee or chamomile enemas and supplements.

1940s

William Koch, MD, and his injectable glyoxylide (distilled water) dominate the alternative cancer treatment market. Dr. Koch claims glyoxylide forces cancer cells to absorb oxygen, which helps rid the body of the toxin that caused cancer.

1950s

Harry Hoxsey develops a therapy that is offered at clinics across the country. The mixture, taken by mouth or applied as a paste directly to the skin, contains numerous supplements and herbs. Hoxsey treatment is now illegal in the United States.

1960s

Krebiozen becomes the most commonly used alternative medicine. Originally prepared by a Yugoslavian physician from the blood of horses injected with bacteria, American physician Andrew Ivy, MD, creates his own liquid formulation, known as Carcalon, that also contains mineral oil or a form of creatine.

1970s

Laetrile, a naturally occurring substance derived primarily from apricot pits, is used by injection, oral tablets, in enemas and topical solutions. Supporters claim cancer cells have more of a certain enzyme in them that splits Laetrile molecules and releases the cyanide within them, thus killing the cancer cells. Another theory claims cancer is a vitamin deficiency that Laetrile can cure.

1980s

Following Gerson therapy of the 1930s, other types of metabolic therapies are used to remove so-called toxins from the body with a combination of special diets, enzymes, supplements and other measures. Kelley’s treatment and the Gonzalez treatment are among the better known therapies.

The American Cancer Society’s Committee on Unproven Methods of Cancer Treatment investigates alternative treatments and publishes a series of articles in the *CA: A Cancer Journal for Clinicians* in the 1980s.

1990s

A book by I. William Lane, PhD, and Linda Comac called *Sharks Don’t Get Cancer* creates interest in shark cartilage as a cancer therapy with claims that it contains proteins that stop blood supply to a tumor. A report by 60 Minutes showing apparent remissions in Cuban cancer patients treated with shark cartilage creates concern among oncologists. By the mid-1990s, an estimated 50,000 American cancer patients are using shark cartilage as a treatment. A variety of other alternative methods make the news, including Stanislaw Burzynski, MD, and his “antineoplastons” —made up mostly of peptides and amino acids—which he claims fight cancer by correcting defective cells to function normally.

1992

The Office of Alternative Medicine is established at the National Institutes of Health to investigate promising alternative treatments. The OAM is renamed the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine in 1999.

2000s

Many unproven alternative cancer cures are promoted, particularly with the widespread use of the Internet. Experts estimate \$1 billion is spent each year on bogus cancer cures.