

Fasting & Chemo

by Brenda Denzler

You don't need to go way outside the medical establishment to find "alternative facts" about cancer worth considering. On the outer edges of the establishment, researchers are pursuing ideas that don't have a very big toe-hold in the intellectual universe of oncologists. These researchers have to fight and scramble for funding to study their ideas. But sometimes, it can really pay off.

Ashley: When I was diagnosed with inflammatory breast cancer, two women helped save my life before doctors ever laid a hand on me. The first was Nancy, whom I called to ask about the odd symptoms in my breast. She told me that it sounded like IBC and I needed to get to the doctor on Monday. The second was Ashley. Three weeks into my ordeal, mere days before my first chemotherapy, I decided I wanted to talk to someone who was currently in treatment for cancer—to see firsthand how allowing that kind of poison into the human body actually affects someone. So Nancy introduced me to Ashley.

I met Ash on a warm July day on the lawn in front of Weaver Street Market. She looked strong, but her face and arms were liberally dotted with pimples and tiny sores that made her look like a teenager plagued with acne. But she was no youngster. She was an attorney with an active practice in civil rights litigation. As she sat down, I was suddenly overcome by a feeling that I could share anything with her. Anything at all. And the surprise question that popped out of my mouth was this:

"Do you ever get tired of yourself?" I blurted. "I mean, they say that when you get cancer, it's all about you. You need to concentrate on you and getting well again. But it's only been three weeks and I am sooooo tired of myself! I'm tired of it being all about me."

"Absolutely," she said, instantly understanding. "All the time."

As we talked, I learned that she had terminal ovarian cancer and was involved in a clinical trial at Duke. The drug she was taking was causing her skin to break out—hence the pimples and sores. We talked about nutrition and diet, taking supplements, and juicing raw

vegetables. Then we talked about my upcoming first infusion.

"Have you considered fasting before your infusion?" she asked me.

In the tsunami of info about alternative cancer treatments sent my way by well-meaning friends, I had not even heard of such a thing, much less considered doing it. Nor had my treatment team mentioned anything like that.

"I fasted before a lot of my chemos, the first time around," she said. "I was actually part of a study being done by Dr. Valter Longo at the University of Southern California. The idea is that cancer cells are metabolically much more active than normal cells. When you fast, your normal cells kind of shut down and go into a protective mode where they aren't as active. But cancer cells have no such braking mechanism. They continue to gobble up any nutrients they can find, and thus they remain very metabolically active.

"When chemo is introduced, the busy cancer cells gobble it up while the less active normal cells absorb less of it. So the chemo isn't as hard on your entire body. I managed to keep most of my hair throughout chemo by doing this. If you want to keep your hair, you should give it a try."

I was intrigued. Something that would minimize chemo's damage to my healthy cells while allowing it to be liberally absorbed by the cancerous ones? With the added bonus of allowing me to keep my hair and avoid looking like a cancer patient? I liked the sound of it. After a bit of research in the medical literature, I decided to do it—but on the QT. No food for two days before my first chemo and three days after.

It was a truly miserable experience. Five days

without solid food is a long time. But did it work?

The first result I got for my efforts was a raging headache that took days to bring under control when the fasting protocol allowed me to eat again. Not fun. Not fun at all!

Then, eight days after the infusion, I wound up in the hospital with a dangerously low white blood cell count and a fever indicating that I might be succumbing to an infection against which I had no defenses, thanks to the chemo. When I revealed to my team that I had fasted for that chemo, they were appalled and quickly became convinced that this is why the immune-boosting shot they had given me hadn't worked. (Hey...they had to have something to blame for this, right?)

Fourteen days after my first infusion, while I was in the shower getting ready to go for my second dose of chemo, I began pulling out small chunks of hair as I shampooed. I was really glad that I hadn't bothered to fast again for this second infusion. Why bother, if I was still going to lose my hair? (Interestingly enough, after the second chemo I once again became feverish and lost almost all of my immune system. So much for the "fasting did it" theory!)

In the end, despite the fact that I still became bald as a billiard ball, I think fasting did help. I'm convinced that it helped my chemo-naïve cancer cells to be maximally impacted by that first dose of poison.

ALTERNATIVE TRUTHS, CANCER LAND STYLE

Longo continues to work on the effects of fasting on different aspects of cancer. Most recently, his research has shown that fasting

can both regenerate the immune system and make its effects against cancerous cells stronger by turning off parts of the system that cancer hijacks and uses to protect itself.

His research, while very reputable and compelling, is not readily praised in some corners of the medical world. The idea of focusing on the metabolism of cancer cells was discredited many decades ago after it was first proposed by Otto Warburg as a key mechanism in the creation of malignancy. After sitting on the shelf, Warburg's theory has been dusted off by a few scientists (like Longo) and subjected to testing. More and more medical researchers today are coming to suspect that the metabolic processes of cancer cells may prove to be their Achilles' Heel.

As for me, I suspect Longo's research into fasting and cancer will generate ever more scientific interest. One critical reviewer of his work has suggested that a new drug could perhaps be developed (Note: and sold at a premium price) that would do the same thing as fasting...a sentiment worthy of a Ferengi-led pharmaceutical industry. Make the low-tech, high-tech, and sell it for as much as you can possibly get.

Brenda Denzler was diagnosed with inflammatory breast cancer in 2009. She became a cancer survivor on the very day she was diagnosed.



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