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Student: Huemer Matthias

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Gender differences in using complementary and alternative medicine in cancer patients: a cross-sectional study

Matthias Huemer; Anna Pansi; Guenter Hofmann; Angelika Terbuch; Elisabeth Sciri; Rainer Lipp; Jasmin Alija Spiegelberg; Daniela Jahn-Kuch; Martin Pichler

Background/aims: Complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) is widely used by cancer patients. Previous studies indicate that women female patients show more affinity to CAM than men. Therefore, we aimed to assess gender differences in the types of used CAM to develop individualized guidance during oncological care for health care practitioners. Methods/Results: We conducted a survey asking cancer patients about their use of CAM. We grouped the different modalities in five categories according to published literature: Whole medical systems (WMS), Body-Mind-Interventions (BMI), Biological treatments (BIO), Manipulative Treatments (MAN), and other treatments (OTH). Additionally, we assessed the symptom burden using the Edmonton Symptom Assessment Scale (ESAS). We then calculated odds ratios to analyze gender differences in patterns of use and patient characteristics. In total, 199 patients completed the survey of which 109 patients reported to use at least one CAM intervention. However, only 48% of CAM users discussed their use with a clinical oncologist. 53% of CAM users were women, which were more likely to use WMS (OR 2.99, CI 95% 1.17, 8.50) and BMI (OR 3.48, CI 95% 1.37, 9.83) interventions compared to men. However, men tended to use more biological interventions (OR 1.54, CI 95% 0.72, 3.35, ref.=women) but this trend was not significant. Women also reported significant higher levels of fatigue (4.38 ± 2.56 vs. 3.18 ± 2.55 , $p=0.019$). MAN and OTH interventions as well as all other patient demographics and clinical characteristics were evenly distributed among genders. Conclusions: Women are more likely to use WMS and BMI therapies and reported greater fatigue than men. The results may indicate a gender bias in the treatment of cancer-related fatigue, leading to a higher chance of women these CAM therapies. Understanding the factors associated with CAM use can provide the healthcare personnel with the theoretical basis for professional guidance of the patients.