



OSHI ABEYAKOON

CANCER:
ONE CONDITION,
two perspectives

AS A DOCTOR WHO HAS HAD FAMILY DIAGNOSED WITH CANCER, OSHI ABEYAKOON HAS WITNESSED A REAL DIFFERENCE BETWEEN EASTERN AND WESTERN APPROACHES TO THE ILLNESS...

Oshi Abeyakoon is a consultant radiologist, working at University College Hospital, London. Future Dreams recently jointly funded a breast coil, enabling Dr Oshi and the UCL team to develop a new technique that has the potential to identify aggressive breast cancers and improve future treatment.



'A cancer cell is like a rude guest at a dinner party who takes over the polite conversation and causes much inconvenience to the host. When the diagnosis of cancer knocks on the door of an individual, their life – and the lives of loved ones – are changed for ever.

'From a western medical perspective, when cancer cells grow, a person starts to notice symptoms such as a lump, pain, skin changes, fatigue and weight loss. It is often these symptoms that trigger a visit to the GP who will then assess the patient and refer them to the hospital for tests. The results are then discussed in a multidisciplinary meeting, where surgeons, oncologists, radiotherapists, radiologists, pathologists, and cancer nurses make a treatment plan. The principle is to offer the least toxic and disfiguring combination of treatment, based on evidence from the research world.

'We are increasingly becoming aware that all breast cancers are not the same. Today the spotlight is shifting

to identify aggressive cancers early and avoid over treatment of indolent ones. As researchers in science and western medicine focus on unravelling the complex web of cancer biology, their findings start to point in the direction of ancient wisdom.

'From an ancient traditional medicine perspective, for example ayurveda, illness is not an inconvenient foe that one tries to get rid of. It is instead a wake-up call that something in one's life needs rebalancing. One looks not only to heal the body through a combination of getting rid of the symptom, but also realigning the body and its energy flow back to health and vitality.

'When these two traditions are compared, some differences are thought provoking.

'A typical GP consultation is 10-20 minutes in length. In ayurveda, an initial consultation is 45 minutes to one hour, minimum. In western medicine the attention paid to the family and social history of a person is a small portion of the medical history. It is centred on the complaint. In ayurveda, the main focus is a detailed enquiry of lifestyle.

'Prescriptions look different too. A GP prescription is shorter; pills and advice. A typical prescription from an ayurvedic doctor is a few pages long. It includes detailed energy practices, dietary changes, ayurvedic medicines (which sometimes have to be made

fresh), and many lifestyle changes to correct the so-called imbalance.

'Is it possible that the first approach cures the symptom while the latter creates a more profound change to restore wellness? Could the two together be the best option? Often before a patient came to me with cancer, there had been several smaller episodes of ill health and life stresses. Could the rise of cancer we see in society be related to the increasing pressures of modern life and breakdown of our regulatory mechanisms, such as the immune system?

'Chronic illnesses such as cancer, arthritis, allergies, diabetes, and heart disease, plague modern society. As we look for solutions for ourselves and our loved ones, how can we create a happy society that feels rested, refreshed, at peace with itself and the environment? The modern world is a place of change. The traditional methods of stability known to our grandparents no longer exist. How do we navigate this? I offer the reader my approach, which has also been defined by three loved ones who have walked the journey of cancer:

'Life is sacred and a gift. If you are reading this and your own life has not been touched with cancer yet, look for ways to increase wellness and happiness. Don't struggle through the day in survivor mode. Find a combination of things to make you happy. Spend time in nature and carve out me-time to replenish. Improve your nutrition, value sleep, and cherish your relationships.

'If cancer has knocked on your door learn about your disease, become an educated patient. Ask yourself what is truly important. Research the treatment options available to you. Focus less on being cured for ever and being afraid of death. Instead, look to live in the present moment better than you did before.

'A complete medicine looks not only to cure your body but heal and restore mind, body and spirit. The greatest privilege of today is that we have access to information online for free.

'This is a time to rally the support of loved ones and make the journey together with all the doctors looking after you.

'Cancer treatment has evolved dramatically. Allow yourself good and bad days. Cancer has a habit of opening up life's Pandora's box. In the box: is also the gift of hope. If doubt arises, seek a second opinion and make sure you get the treatment plan that is right for you.

'If you are now in remission or living with cancer, know that you have a resilience that those who have not had it will never know. You have survived. A big part of surviving is to live without the fear of the disease returning. Let go of that fear. Don't let cancer occupy every room of your life. Instead, let it be the foundation that gives you the strength to build a life born of experience. Embrace your life – live well.

'I leave you with a question. What is cancer to you? One thing is certain. It will always teach us.'