



Media Release

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Case for alternative treatments

Wendy Laursen takes a look at complementary medicines

A NOMINATION for the Australian Skeptics' Bent Spoon Award hasn't deterred Dr David Joske from pursuing complementary therapies for his patients.

The Best Spoon Award is presented annually to "the perpetrator of the most preposterous piece of paranormal or pseudo-scientific piffle". Joske was nominated for his work at the SolarisCare centre in the Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital in Perth.

Joske, a haematologist, opened the centre in 2001 in response to the huge number of cancer patients he saw that were trying complementary therapies.

"I've really gone from feeling like I had to have an open mind to actually having an open mind," Joske, who wanted to avoid the typical situation where people are hesitant about discussing complementary and alternative medicine with their medical practitioners, said.

Australians are estimated to spend as much money on complementary and alternative medicine as they do on patient contributions to conventional treatment and the use of alternatives appears to be increasing in many countries.

According to Joske, part of the reason for this is that, "we run a very biotechnological, population-based, hypothesis-testing driven Western medical model of care which focuses on the disease, not the person, and arguably it completely dis-empowers people when they are sick."

Joske says his centre can encourage cancer patients to take a more active role in their treatment by offering them selected complementary therapies to help relieve the symptoms of cancer and its treatment, and by giving them access to a wide range of information about treatment options.

The centre offers a range of touch-based and psychological therapies, including massage, pranic healing — a form of hands-off massage, meditation, and guided self-imagery.

Question and Answer

The American Cancer Society advises patients to be sceptical of unorthodox treatments if the answer to any of the following questions is "yes".

- 1) Is the treatment based on an unproven theory?
- 2) Does the treatment promise a cure for all cancers?
- 3) Are you told not to use conventional medical treatment?
- 4) Is the treatment or drug a "secret" that only certain providers can give?
- 5) Does the treatment require you to travel to another country?
- 6) Do the promoters attack the medical/scientific establishment?

■ http://www.cancer.org/docroot/ETO/content/ETO_5_1_Introduction.asp



LOOKING ELSEWHERE: Australians are estimated to spend as much money on complementary and alternative medicine as they do on patient contributions to conventional treatment and the use of alternatives.

In choosing the therapies, Joske looked for practitioners with whom he could meaningfully discuss clinical outcomes. He avoided some, such as one person who wanted to hang crystals in the hospital. He also avoided any therapies that involved the ingestion of herbal remedies because he did not have the facilities for their careful evaluation.

As part of his plan to provide patients with good information about complementary and alternative treatments, Joske conducted a review of the scientific evidence for and against touch-based and psychological therapies. He found some positive results.

"Massage seems to be particularly good for anxiety, acupuncture is good for nausea, music therapy is very good for mood, and there is probably a large number more where we just haven't done the work yet," he said.

Few of the therapies were shown to extend the life expectancy of cancer patients. Those that did, such as supportive-expressive group therapy where participants talk about their feelings, involved relatively small-scale studies and the positive effects were not apparent in larger-scale randomised controlled trials.

Joske is conducting his own research and has used surveys to assess the quality of life of people attending his centre. So far, he has evaluated the results for 818 cancer patients and found significant improvement in distressing symptoms such as fatigue, depression,