

# Editor's comment

## Questionable judgement



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A while ago I was sitting in the waiting room of a local chiropractor. I hasten to add that I was not seeing a chiropractor but my sports masseur, who has a room there. The receptionist was chatting to one of the chiropractors, showing her a photograph of a friend of hers with breast cancer and asked me to look too. The photograph showed a pleasant elderly woman with a large fungating lesion of her breast. The chiropractor asked if this was an external tumour, and was told, no, this was 'the body's way of ridding itself of the tumour'.

I listened to the rest of the conversation while waiting for my appointment. I must admit that I did not comment. Perhaps I should have done so. You can make your own judgement. The woman with breast cancer had apparently rejected conventional treatment in favour of naturopathy and had consulted a local naturopath who put her on a series of 'detoxing' diets after which, according to the receptionist, she was so 'cleansed' that the body was now getting rid of the tumour by ejecting it to the outside. This is what the naturopath told her patient, whom she treated for 18 months until saying that she could do no more for her and the woman must now go to conventional doctors.

The patient apparently then went to Groote Schuur Hospital (she couldn't afford

private medicine – probably because of the thousands she had already spent on the naturopath), where the doctors were 'quite angry with her'! She was told that they couldn't operate, but they put her on tamoxifen and now the tumour was shrinking. According to the naturopath, this was because of all the cleansing that had occurred before starting conventional medication.

The woman in question is in her 70s – so there was every chance that all she would have needed was surgery and maybe radiotherapy plus tamoxifen for a complete cure. She now faces a painful and totally unnecessary death from her disease. You could say that she made her own choices when she consulted a naturopath and that the consequences are her own responsibility. However, my experience is that people have so little knowledge of their own bodies and of what conventional medicine is all about that they will all too happily accept the word of quacks and charlatans, particularly if they are persuasive, as many of our alternative and complementary colleagues are. I recently had to steer a good friend away from making the same questionable choices when she was diagnosed with breast cancer.

As far as I am concerned the actions of this naturopath were criminal. I would

love to know if she (the naturopath) genuinely believes that the fungating mass is 'the body's way of ridding itself of the tumour', particularly given the fact that the naturopath then referred the woman to conventional medicine once she saw what was happening to her patient.

How many other people, I wonder, has this particular naturopath killed? Why is it possible for people to practise this highly questionable kind of 'medicine' with absolutely no regulation. A few years ago another friend was diagnosed with colon cancer. She also went to a naturopath, but in conjunction with conventional medicine. She sadly died of her disease, but she at least had the benefit of the chances that conventional medicine can offer. And with a more ethical naturopath who simply offered an alternative in conjunction with conventional medicine. For those who have some faith in alternative and complementary medicine there is generally little against its use alongside conventional medicine (unless medications clash with herbal remedies). But this story verges on the criminal. I am not sure what the answer is, but I do think that some kind of regulation and a system of checks and balances should be introduced in some way, not least to keep the good name of those alternative practitioners who do practise in an ethical fashion.

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