

## ONCOLOGY IN AYURVEDA – PRESENT STATUS

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### Introduction

Ayurveda as the name implies, is considered as the science of life. The approach of Ayurveda towards diseases is based up on its unique *tridosha* principle (*vata*, *pitta*, and *kapha*). Like Modern Medicine, Ayurveda has its own role in the prevention and management of cancer. In the ancient time, during the beginning period of ayurvedic science, cancer was not an important disease entity, due to its less prevalence. But presently, the situation has thoroughly changed and it is now the major cause of fatality, second only to cardiac ailments. It is no more considered as an unimportant illness as in the past. Naturally ayurvedic scholars also take their interest in the field of cancer management.

You may wonder that descriptions about cancer as the disease is available in the ancient ayurvedic book Susruta samhitha, which is thought to be written in 2500 B.C. The author, the great sage Susruta, who is considered as the father of plastic surgery, has given a clear picture of the nature and symptomatology of cancerous tumors. He named it as '*arbuda*' (A Sanskrit term with multi-vocal meaning. It represent a Swelling; Tumor; a long round mass; Lump of flesh with rough surface etc. Another relevant meaning is "that which possess a killing or hurting instinct". The word *arbuda* is also a numeral for one hundred million, which may be interpreted as reflection of uncontrolled multiplication of cells, another meaning which denotes the creature 'crab', which is at present, is the universal symbol of cancer). In our language, this disease is labeled as *arbudam*, which is actually borrowed from Sanskrit. In the same contest, Susruta explained its metastatic tendency, recurrence etc. and he clearly mentioned the incurable nature of these stages. As Indians, we must be proud of

him and many such great physicians who were well expertise in life science at the time western people do not even think of it.

### **Scope of Ayurveda in cancer therapy**

As you all know modern medicine leaps miles ahead in cancer management. Newer and newer therapeutic measures are emerging, and in the near future, we hope that this deadly disease will be under control. But the major problem is that treatment expenses also getting up steeply and the average people find these measures untouchable. The treatment modalities are also not very feasible to patient as it include surgery, radiation and many such painful procedures. In this context, some people think of other medical science like ayurveda, and it is gaining popular now.

You all may be familiar with the plant based medicine Vincristine - a chemotherapy medicine. At first it was extracted form the plant named Vinca rosea, plant, has been used by ayurveda for the treatment of *arbuda* (cancer) long before.

There are plenty of medicinal plants that have proved anti-cancerous properties. Some of the examples I can quote here. Plants like Semicarpus anacardium, Aloe vera, Curcuma longa, Ficus bengalensis, Terminalia arjuna and many more, expresses proven anti cancerous and anti cell proliferative property. The judicious combinations of these medicines either in decoction form (*kasyanam*) or many such forms are used in ayurveda. In addition to these plant based form, several herbo-mineral preparations like *Rasagandhimezhuku* etc. are commonly used without the fear of side effects.

As this science consider not a disease alone, but the human as a whole, medicines that are used for the correction of imbalance of bodily humors (*tridosha*) which will aid in fast resolution of diseases, are also employed according to the disease type.

The ayurvedic cancer therapy at present is confined to some firms like Kottakkal Arya Vaidya Sala, Amala Cancer Institute etc. but the major problem facing these institutes is that majority of cases they are getting are cases, discarded by modern therapy i.e. terminally ill patients. So the successful cases are also less. Even if patients getting symptomatic relief. There are many successful stories of fresh coming cancer patients in research wing of Kottakkal Arya Vaidya Sala, the author is also a witness of this. These patients decided ayurveda as the primary measure of treatment (they are not from Kerala).

In addition, several single drug remedies are available, some of them are secret, scattered among local physicians. These should be thoroughly explored and added to the present knowledge.

#### **Ayurveda- the ideal adjuvant of modern cancer therapy**

Newer studies reveal that ayurvedic preparations contain large number of anti oxidants or oxygen scavengers. In addition plant based medicines contain so many vital molecules like vitamins, minerals etc. I think this may be the principle behind the specialized ayurvedic formulations called *rasayana* drugs (you may be aware of *Chyavanaprasam*, one of the most widely used ayurvedic *rasayana* drug) for preventing the ageing process as well as the onset of diseases. The use of these *rasayana* drugs along with modern cytotoxic drugs will definitely minimize the ill effects of these chemotherapy drugs. One such research took place in ayurvedic research center in Italy; there they provided the same *Chyavanaprasam*, along with chemotherapy medicines with awfully approving result.

#### **Ayurveda- a helping hand in cancer palliation**

We all are aware of the nature of malignant diseases. Once it reaches beyond the control, nothing can reverse its progression. The only possible measure we can take is the aid for peaceful demise of the sufferer. The measures are pain reduction, relief from the intense

weakness and cachexia, psychological assurance etc. in ayurvedic field, we admit that there is not much pain relieving drugs at present that act like morphine. But I can say an instance of ayurvedic assistance in cancer palliation. Kottakkal Arya Vaidya Sala conducted a research work in the field of cancer palliation with the collaboration of Medical College, Kozhikode. The subject was the relief of morphine induced constipation with the ayurvedic medicine *Mishrakasneham* which is a well known purgative in ayurveda. The result was very encouraging. This is also a good example of the beneficiary effect of combined therapy.

### **Need of further research**

In contrary with the Modern Medicine, Ayurvedic researches in the field of oncology are still in infantile stage. Apart from some activities of few private institutions, very few research works are conducting in this field from government side. This situation should be changed and we must explore more from this hidden treasure of ayurveda - the noble effort of our ancestors, to accomplish their concern.

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