



Letter

Comment on:
Does use of alternative medicine predict survival from cancer?
Eur J Cancer 2003, **39**, 372–377[☆]

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Received 17 March 2003; accepted 24 March 2003

Risberg and colleagues [1] present data on cancer survival in users and non-users of alternative medicine. Several aspects of this study severely undermine its validity:

1. Out of 911 patients addressed only 421 were included in the regression analysis. An attrition rate of 54% leaves room for substantial selection bias and there was no analysis of the non-respondents.
2. Among the study patients, alternative medicine (AM) users had initially more severely progressed cancer than non-users: more AM users had distant metastases (65% versus 53%), fewer AM users had curative treatments (32% versus 50%). More severely diseased cancer patients tend to have a shorter survival. Additionally, the distribution of different cancer forms between AM users and non-users was not provided.
3. After attempting to correct for baseline differences, the authors found no statistically significant

difference in survival between AM users (eight different AM techniques listed) and non-users. A significant difference was found in only one group (Eastern Cooperative Oncology Group (ECOG) 0) out of six reported subgroups (ECOG 0, 1, 2 and 3, patients with metastatic disease, patients with palliative care).

Such *post-hoc* subgroup analysis in a study with a 54% attrition rate, with initially disadvantaged AM users and with overall insignificant results, comparing heterogeneous therapies in heterogeneous cancer forms does not justify any speculations about causal links between AM use and cancer survival.

References

1. Risberg T, Vickers A, Bremnes RM, Wist EA, Kaasa S, Cassileth BR. Does use of alternative medicine predict survival from cancer? *Eur J Cancer* 2003, **39**(3), 372–377.

[☆] doi of original article: 10.1016/S0959-8049(02)00701-3

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