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From Curable to Critical: A Case of Squamous Cell Carcinoma and Alternative Medicine.

Patient performance status and overall health are important prognostic indicators in patients diagnosed with malignancy. However, an important exception exists: patients with non-metastatic cancers that typically have favorable outcomes with standard therapy, who instead choose to pursue alternative medicine in place of evidence-based treatments. As physicians, it is crucial to understand this patient population and provide clear, compassionate counseling on the risks and limitations of non-conventional therapies.

A 50-year-old man with squamous cell carcinoma of the tongue was transferred to our facility for evaluation of symptomatic anemia in the setting of a large, bleeding right neck mass. Initially diagnosed as a 2 cm mass of the right tongue base in 2024, his tumor was 16.9 x 8.9 x 17.3 cm in size, with lymph node metastasis. On arrival, he was hypotensive, fatigued, with labored respirations. On exam, he had a large fungating neck mass, associated right arm and facial edema from venous congestion. The tumor exerted such pressure on his chest and neck that he supported his weight with his arms and legs. Labs were significant for hemoglobin of 3.3 g/dL, for which he required multiple transfusions prior to stabilization. Since his diagnosis, he had refused surgery, radiation, and chemotherapy several times, and instead pursued treatment through naturopathic providers. These therapies included garlic injections, high-dose vitamin C infusions, cayenne pepper, essential oil salves, herbal “chemotherapy,” vitamin supplementation, and a restrictive diet. Though he met with oncologists and surgeons early in his diagnosis, he remained firmly committed to alternative medicine and continued seeking a naturopathic cure. During the course of his treatment, the patient perceived common signs of cancer growth, such as necrosis and bleeding, as evidence that the naturopathic remedies were working. By the time of our evaluation, the tumor was inoperable due to vascular invasion. He continued to decline all cancer-directed therapy, though he accepted transfusions to manage his anemia.

We appreciate when patients are engaged and proactive in their care. Yet within this group, those who use alternative medicine are particularly vulnerable. Studies show that patients who regularly use vitamins, supplements, and naturopathic therapies are more likely to delay or decline standard treatment—especially when diagnosed at an early stage. However, there is no credible evidence that alternative medicine improves survival. In contrast, treatment delays can make curative options impossible, especially for tumors near major vasculature that grow rapidly. Alternative medicine may offer supportive benefits for symptom relief, but it is not curative. Respectful, evidence-based conversations remain essential to guiding patients toward effective care—before the opportunity for cure is lost.