

In Search of Cancer's CURE

Cancer patients from around the world are looking to a Mexican doctor—Francisco Contreras—whose Christian hospital challenges conventional medical wisdom

After an unsuccessful round of chemotherapy, Marta Fenyő of Budapest, Hungary, looked into other health-care options. A victim of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, 53-year-old Fenyő had heard positive reports about Oasis of Hope Hospital in Tijuana, Mexico, just 30 minutes from the San Diego Airport. "Hope" was exactly what she needed, so she made arrangements to go through the hospital's 14-day cancer therapy. Her daughter went along as her hospital companion.

"Chemotherapy destroys the immune system," she says with a slight accent. "The therapy practiced at Oasis of Hope is designed to build it up."

Wearing a turban to cover the hair loss caused by her initial harsh treatment, Fenyő reminisces about the past while resting in her hospital bed. She says her stay at Oasis of Hope represents the line between her old life and her new life. A physicist in Hungary, her days used to be stressful and busy. She didn't make time for regular physical activity, and she ate sporadically. Often, she would skip breakfast and lunch and eat large meals late at night.

"Things will be different when I return," she says.

At Oasis of Hope, Fenyő has bonded with patients from all over the world: an Amish family from the United States; a professional couple from Malaysia; a homemaker and her friend from Jasper, Georgia; an elderly couple from England; a

retired chiropractor and his spouse from Napa, California. Though they may speak different languages and have different customs, they all are trying to beat that dreaded enemy called cancer—and they all share a passion to live and be healthy again.

Guiding the medical team at Oasis of Hope is physician Francisco Contreras, a surgical oncologist (cancer specialist) who studied in Austria and decided to follow in his father's footsteps. Ernesto Contreras Sr. founded the hospital in 1963.

"My father began his practice before I went to medical school, so I was already in tune with his philosophy," Contreras says. "I was convinced that what the medical world was doing as far as cancer is concerned was not the best."

Contreras refers to his practice as "eclectic." He uses both conventional and alternative therapies, depending on what he feels will work best for the patient.

"Right now, there is a very big division between alternative and orthodox medicine," he explains. "My responsibility is the health of my patient. I'm not going to say that because I belong to a movement, I'll never use a particular therapy. That's foolish."

As part of its mission, Oasis of Hope operates under two premises:

- 1. Do the body no harm (Hippocrates).** "In the medical profession, we tend to do things by the book," Contreras says. "As a result, we often kill people." Oasis of Hope aims to

treat the patient, not the disease.

2. Love your patient as you love yourself (Jesus). “If I wouldn’t give a treatment to my mom, myself or my daughter, why would I give it to my patient?”

Chemotherapy isn’t Contreras’ favorite method of treatment. Although it may get rid of the tumor, he says, chemotherapy has no significant impact on life extension—and it usually reduces a person’s quality of life. “Removing or destroying tumors without taking the necessary steps to restore the organic deficiencies that caused them accounts for most cancer recurrences and deaths,” he explains.

However, Contreras is not opposed to using chemotherapy under certain circumstances. If a person has a tumor that is blocking his airways, chemotherapy can reduce that tumor in three or four days, whereas an alternative therapy may take months. “In this situation, chemo is worth it, even though the patient is going to lose his hair and vomit.”

In most cases, Contreras is much more likely to use a natural chemotherapy called laetrile (also known as B-17 or amygdalin), which has been approved in Mexico but not in the United States. Amygdalin is found in more than 1,200 plants, including the seeds of apricots, peaches, plums and apples. Contreras’ father is a pioneer in the use of laetrile, and he maintains that it is effective in treating common tumors such as carcinomas of the prostate, breast, colon and lungs, as well as lymphomas.

The National Cancer Institute (NCI) isn’t so optimistic, however. According to NCI, case reports have provided little

evidence to support laetrile as an anti-cancer treatment. The organization warns that when taken in high doses, it can cause cyanide poisoning. (For more information, call the Cancer Information Service at 800-422-6237.)

Such reports don't convince 70-year-old Betty Roberts of Garden Grove, California, however. In 1975, she went to Oasis of Hope—and to this day, she believes it saved her life. Roberts told Charisma that she had a semimassive mastectomy in 1975, and cancer was later found in her lymph nodes. Not wanting to go through chemotherapy, she visited Ernesto Contreras Sr. He administered laetrile, and before long she was cured of cancer. Roberts still takes laetrile in supplement form, and her husband uses it as prevention.

Coffee enemas are another commonly used alternative at Oasis of Hope. According to Contreras, this treatment is designed to stimulate liver function and help the body detoxify itself. Though it's not pleasant, patients often joke about it and hang signs on their doors that say, "I'm taking a coffee break."

Again, this is a controversial treatment. Critics say it can cause electrolyte imbalance or dehydration and damage to the colon.

Contreras acknowledges that herbal products and therapies in Mexico are often based on basic scientific research rather than clinical research, which is the most reliable. "About 24 percent of the Mexican population lives in extreme poverty, so we are taught a lot of herbal medicine in school. That's the only medicine many people have access to," he says. "As a result, the Mexican government tends to be open to natural medicine."

Food therapy is another important part of treatment at Oasis of Hope. Patients gather in the dining hall three times a day and help themselves to beautifully prepared trays of organic fruits, vegetables and juices.

Depending on their specific therapy, some patients are permitted to eat nuts and whole-grain breads. Those who are brave might try vegetables such as cactus, which somewhat resembles green beans. Condiments clearly missing from the tables include butter, salt, sugar and ketchup; and meat and dairy products are nowhere to be found.

“There are so many fruits, and a few I’ve never seen,” says Frances Shelton of New Orleans, whose husband, Robert, is being treated for stomach and liver cancer. “The food is wonderfully displayed—just like Good Housekeeping magazine. It makes it inviting.”

Contreras believes we need to provide our bodies with nutrients, and the only way to do that is to eat food as close as possible to the way God put it on this earth. “The more manipulated it is,” he says, “the more damaging and [the] less nutrients we get.”

Few hospitals give patients the opportunity to dine together, and it’s a shame because the experience helps create social ties. Table talk at Oasis may include discussions of coffee enemas or other treatments—but it contributes to the laid-back, “family” atmosphere of the hospital. The patients know they aren’t alone in their suffering.

A spiritual-emotional program is also offered at Oasis of

Hope. Patients can attend daily devotions and Sunday morning chapel, and counselors are available 24 hours a day for prayer.

“I feel that the biggest difference in this hospital is not what we do—but that we present God in a very objective way, at a time when people need it the most,” Contreras says. “We have more conversions in this hospital than we do in our church.”

According to Dr. Edward T. Creagan, an oncologist for nearly 30 years, “there is fairly good evidence that there are two factors of overriding importance in the fate of people with cancer. One is social connectedness, and [the other] is spirituality.”

Because he sees terminal cancer patients on a regular basis, Contreras has dealt with many soul-searching questions such as: “Why me? Why not someone who is on death row?”

Yet he puts a different spin on that question. “Why not me?” he counters. “Why not allow God to show me what this is going to do for me in a beneficial way?”

“I believe God wants you to thank Him for the cancer,” he says. “Once you start doing that, the cancer becomes absolutely secondary, and you have peace. If you die, then you go peacefully—where you truly are going to be cured.”

Contreras believes it is downright unscriptural to say, “If I had enough faith, the disease would go away.”

“A lot of people don’t read the whole Bible,” he says, citing

the example of Lazarus, whom Jesus raised from the dead. "His friends and family didn't have faith—they told Jesus that He was too late," he says. "So whose faith is important? Jesus' faith. He's the only One who had faith."

Contreras believes it is as unreasonable to expect that God heals everybody as it is to expect that God answers everybody's prayers with a yes. "When patients can accept this," he says, "they rise to a new level of peace."

As hard as it may be to digest, Contreras suggests that perhaps there's a God-given purpose for a person's cancer. "I explain to my patients that there are diseases we inherit, diseases that result from sin and diseases with a purpose," he says. "A preacher will usually tell a person with cancer that God has no purpose with it—that the disease is from the devil. Well, I believe there are diseases that are not from the devil."

Contreras recalls that not long ago, he asked a patient why he hadn't gathered for prayer. The man explained that before his bout with cancer, three of his children were divorced.

"Because of my disease," he told Contreras, "two of my children are back together. The third one—not yet. As a result, I'm not ready to be healed yet."

"We pray for healing with all of our hearts," says Contreras, "but as Jesus said while praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, 'Father, Your will be done.' I think it takes a greater faith to pray this prayer."

"I believe very much in the power of prayer, but I believe we

should be praying that God will resolve our eternal problems with a lot more strength than the problems that are temporary.”

Contreras suggests that researchers are still a long way from finding a cure for cancer. “Health care is more of a political problem than it is a medical problem,” he says. “We have been hearing for the past 50 years that we are on the brink of a cure for cancer, but I think it’s a political statement.”

The cure rate at Oasis of Hope is 17 percent, he says, which is higher than the 11 percent of some of the largest cancer centers. The good news is that 86 percent of the patients who come to his center live longer than expected and with a better quality of life.

“To me, that is a triumph,” he says. “Most hospitals cannot come close to that. We’re not striving only for the cure—in fact, some patients aren’t cured but are still alive 20 years later.”

A cure should not always be the goal, Contreras says. “Our goal is to provide a quality of life for an indefinite period of time and to provide our patients with resources for them to heal themselves.”

Oasis of Hope has treated about 100,000 people since it opened; about 60 percent have visited for cancer treatment. Each year, the hospital staff sees about 600 cancer patients, and most of them stay for three weeks.

Because the hospital offers alternative treatments, only 20 percent to 25 percent of insurance companies will pay for

patients to stay there. As a result, most patients spend \$40,000-\$45,000 out of their own pockets—which, though less than the typical \$100,000 hospital bill in the United States, is still a lot of money.

Although Oasis of Hope isn't perfect, most patients don't seem to regret their visit for a minute. "I'm happy I came here," says Mary Ellen Childree of Jasper, Georgia, who is battling melanoma. She believes the Lord directed her to Contreras.

"Our doctor in the New Orleans area didn't give my husband any hope," adds Frances Shelton with tears in her eyes. "We are returning home with hope."

The popularity of Oasis of Hope and other hospitals that offer alternative care demonstrates how desperately people, whether Christians or not, want to extend their lives. Contreras believes it's natural and nothing to be ashamed of.

"In our genetic makeup, God gave us the information that we were going to live forever," he philosophizes. "If Adam and Eve hadn't messed up, we would have lived forever. How that was going to be, I don't know. But God made us to be survivors."

"I hear a lot of preachers saying: 'This world is so terrible! I want Jesus to come now.' What they are saying is: 'I want to die. I don't want to be here.'"

"The next day they get a cold and start praying for healing. Who understands it?" he laughs.

As a physician, Contreras wants to help patients live for, say, five years instead of three months. But to him, eternal issues are much more significant.

“If I am able to lead a person to Christ and know in my heart that he is going to be in heaven, that is much more satisfying,” he says with a smile. Like Marta Fenyő, Contreras’ patients at Oasis of Hope receive the hope of an eternity with God as well as the hope of a longer life on earth.

Steps to Staying Healthy

Here are three sensible ways to reduce your risk for cancer

According to recent statistics, 560,000 Americans die each year from cancer. It’s estimated that 50 percent of men and 30 percent of women in the United States will, at some point in their lives, have cancer. Next to heart disease, it is the second leading cause of death.

What can we do to reverse the trends? Dr. Francisco Contreras sheds light on three of the most important ways to curb the disease.

1. Eat for nourishment. “Our body is going to function depending on the fuel we provide our body. If we provide it good fuel, it’s going to last a long time,” Contreras says. He emphasizes that because our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, we need to keep them clean. “We wouldn’t go to church and smear it with oil and grease—yet we do that with [these]

temple[s] on a daily basis.”

Contreras promotes organically grown fruits and veggies. However, he acknowledges that if you eat the recommended five to seven servings of fruits and veggies a day—even if they aren’t organic—you can still benefit from the disease-fighting phytochemicals they contain. In his book, *The Hope of Living Cancer Free* (Siloam Press), he talks about the importance of buying free-range meat that has not been injected with drugs such as antibiotics, growth hormone and estrogen.

2. Exercise regularly. “If you exercise four hours a week, you reduce your chances of getting female cancers by 66 percent,” he says. “You’re also protecting yourself from diabetes, heart disease, arthritis, and you’re going to enjoy life more and for a longer time.”

3. Have a positive attitude. Studies have shown that five minutes of anger will depress your immune system for up to six hours, Contreras says. If you destroy your immune system with anger, no matter how well you take care of yourself by eating properly and exercising, you’re putting yourself at risk for disease.

Contreras believes that in order to have a good attitude, you need spiritual fortitude. “I tell myself that the only way to be happy is to have love. The only way to experience love is to have Jesus in your heart. Then you can love yourself first and then love others, no matter what the situation around you is.”

Remember, about 40 percent of all cancers are related to lifestyle choices such as smoking, alcohol, obesity, high-fat

diets and inactive lifestyles. If you control lifestyle factors such as these, you will dramatically reduce your risk of cancer. For more specifics on prevention, read Contreras' latest book, *The Hope of Living Long & Well* (Siloam Press).

Francisco Contreras

Age: 49

Spouse: Rosa Alicia

Children: Rosa Estela, Marcela, Sandra, Debora, Francisco

Church: San Pablo, an independent charismatic church in Tijuana, Mexico

Plans for Oasis of Hope Hospital: To open four new research centers—for heart disease, female disease, children's issues and spinal cord injuries

Alternative Medicine: East Meets West

Nontraditional health treatments are booming—but believers need to be wary of false claims and New Age philosophies.

Nearly a decade ago, the National Institutes of Health took a giant step and opened the Office of Alternative Medicine. Now called the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM), the center has a \$90 million research budget to provide information on alternative therapies and treatments, including acupuncture, homeopathy, herbs, therapeutic massage, traditional Oriental medicine, and vitamins and minerals.

Consumer interest in alternative medicine is at an all-time high. In fact, national research shows that eight out of 10 cancer patients use some form of complementary and alternative

medicine (CAM), and most of them do so in combination with their conventional treatments.

Ideally, complementary and conventional medicine should work together. According to Dr. Adrian Dobs of the Johns Hopkins Center for Cancer Complementary Medicine, physicians must become more knowledgeable about CAM practices and more sensitive to patients seeking guidance on using the treatments. He is calling for “rigorous, randomized, controlled clinical studies to help us determine what works and what does not work.”

Unfortunately, people often make health-related decisions based on someone’s testimonial instead of on convincing research. To help believers wade through the murky waters concerning CAM, Dónal O’Mathúna, Ph.D., and Dr. Walt Larimore have written a helpful resource titled *Alternative Medicine: The Christian Handbook* (Zondervan). A professional review committee consisting of primary-care physicians in private practice and in academic medicine reviewed the book before publication.

Alternative Medicine is the first in a series to be released from the Christian Medical Association and Zondervan Publishing House. According to Larimore, both groups felt that a bulk of health books on Christian bookshelves weren’t medically based or biblically sound. This series attempts to reverse that situation.

“Some therapies have no compelling evidence to support them, and yet there are practitioners who believe very adamantly in them,” says Larimore, vice president of medical outreach for Focus on the Family.

“There are other therapies that have wonderful evidence to support them, and at least in America, practitioners have been very slow to accept that evidence. We want consumers to be aware of bad evidence. We also want consumers to be able to get dependable product.”

Currently, with herbal supplements, U.S. consumers don’t know for sure what they are buying. The Food and Drug Administration has limited regulatory oversight for the industry.

The quality and strength of the supplements can vary among different brands and from batch to batch. To help consumers make wise decisions, has created a “CL Seal of Approved Quality,” which it licenses to manufacturers for use on products that have passed its evaluations.

In addition, experts at the Mayo Clinic suggest looking for the letters “USP” (United States Pharmacopeia) or “NF” (National Formulary) on herbal supplements before purchasing them. The “USP” designation means that the herb has an approved use and was manufactured according to certain standards. “NF” means that the herb does not have a USP-approved use but has been produced according to the same standards of quality and purity.

The Mayo Clinic also advises people to let their doctors know which herbal supplements they are taking. Some herbs can have a toxic effect when mixed with prescription drugs.

When considering treatment, Larimore recommends seeking the wisdom of family and friends, a personal physician, and perhaps even a pastor.

Christians have an additional consideration when exploring alternative medicine: Is it scripturally sound? Eastern and New Age belief systems are part of many alternative therapies, including therapeutic touch and qigong.

Larimore cautions people about treatments that are contrary to Scripture—or even questionably so, such as tai chi or yoga. Although scientists have found both therapies to be effective treatments for anxiety, Larimore suggests that some practitioners may use these therapies as a “form of evangelism for non-Christian beliefs.”

Moreover, practitioners in some cities have become experts at double-speak. “They know how to speak to Christians because they want to lead them in and convert them,” Larimore says. “While that doesn’t work well with people who are well-grounded in Scripture and understand a Christian worldview, it certainly can be a weed that can ensnare a newer Christian and cause [him] to fall away.”

The bottom line is that all healing isn’t of God. “[Satan] can do the miraculous and always has—in biblical times and now,” Larimore says. “The fact that something heals and is effective does not mean it is good.”

What about Christians who offer alternative treatments and therapies?

“There are people who sincerely believe that what they are doing is right but have no evidence to support it—or there is evidence to refute it, and they are operating under a system of false beliefs,” he says. “To the extent they exclude truth,

they are excluding God.”

Carol Chapman Stertzner is a former assistant editor of Charisma who now lives near Dallas.