

Death-defying cancer diets raise concerns

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If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is. That is the stark warning to people seeking a medical cure by downing glasses of green juice or megadoses of vitamin C.

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Ultra-purified juices and coffee enemas might score plenty of “likes” on social media, but health and ethics experts want consumers to know one thing — they will not cure cancer.

Nor does your body need to be “manually detoxed” they argue, because it is already well-equipped to remove everyday wastes that now have become alarmingly described by some as “toxic”.

Some conventional health practitioners and academics shrug off the burgeoning interest in unorthodox treatments as a healthy sign that people are more empowered and thinking outside the box, but others are worried about claims going unchecked and are speaking out.

A few years ago, University of Tasmania oncologist Ray Lowenthal and a colleague took on alternative cancer guru Ian Gawler’s claims he cured himself of advanced cancer through herbal remedies, coffee enemas and diet.

They suggested instead of cancer, he had tuberculosis which was cured by antibiotics, a claim Dr Gawler has rejected.

It is not the only time Professor Lowenthal has taken on extreme alternative medicine advocates.

He wrote to the Medical Board of Australia about Perth doctor William Barnes, backing a complaint by a patient in 2009 who alleged the doctor made false claims promoting “non-toxic” cancer treatments, including mineral replacement and psycho-spiritual healing.

Dr Barnes was consequently fined \$25,000 last year for falsely claiming to cure cancer by alternative remedies such as vitamin C and green tea extracts.

But the penalty did not seem to affect his loyal followers. When *The West Australian* published the finding, former patients wrote letters supporting his natural “non-toxic” therapies, one describing him as “a gem in the world of holistic medicine”.

Another critic of fringe medicine is Edith Cowan University ethicist Julie Crews, who lectures in business but has a strong interest in ethics in the health industry, particularly dietary claims in relation to life-threatening diseases.

She says the diet industry, worth billions of dollars, regularly swamps consumers with quick-fix wonder foods and diets.

But Dr Crews says it is one thing to offer general advice about wellbeing and another to promote “death-defying diets” that could have tragic consequences.

“The dietary claims I believe represent a far more worrying and potentially dangerous trend are from individuals who make explicit claims that a diet is responsible for their survival from a life-threatening disease, most often cancer,” she says.

Dr Crews is particularly alarmed by claims of raw vegan diets curing cancer, while traditional treatments such as chemotherapy are dismissed.

One of her targets is Jess Ainscough, a charismatic young Australian woman who has a rare form of cancer but shunned a poor prognosis six years ago to become a writer, holistic health coach and in her own words —“a green-juicin’ cancer-kickin’ wellness warrior”.

On her website, Ms Ainscough says she does not have scans, partly because she does not want to subject her body to the poison and radiation, and has “100 per cent faith that my body knows how to heal”.

In a 2010 blog, she claimed mammograms were useless and dangerous, and instead recommended thermography, an alternative breast imaging technique that has now been roundly discredited by reputable cancer authorities.

“Many women subject themselves to the torturous ordeal of having a mammogram because they believe the act is the best way to catch breast cancer,” Ms Ainscough wrote.

“Mammograms may increase the risk of causing and spreading cancer by the force that is used to squeeze the breast tissue. Benign tumours may become activated, and actual cancerous tumours may become more aggressive and may release cancer cells into the bloodstream.”

Dr Crews says the comments are disturbing and give women fundamentally inaccurate information. They also ignore that a woman’s chances of surviving breast cancer today are significantly higher because of advances in research and treatment.

But like Dr Barnes, Ms Ainscough is not short of like-minded followers, some of whom recently paid \$100 a ticket for a sellout book tour of Australia, which included Perth.

Her events promoter Yvette Luciano, herself a breast cancer survivor, said Ms Ainscough had a rare form of cancer that could not be treated conventionally.

“She gets emails every day asking for advice, and she never tells anyone to ignore their doctor or not have conventional treatment,” Ms Luciano says.

“She advocates that people seek their own path to healing, and offers inspiration to people who are told by their doctors they are terminal and there’s nothing they can do.”

She says Ms Ainscough’s views have also evolved over the years, so she does not necessarily think the same way as she did when she wrote her earlier blogs.

Soon after Ms Luciano was interviewed, the post about mammograms was no longer accessible on the website.

Cancer Council WA nutrition and physical activity manager Steve Pratt, who convenes the Dietitians Association of Australia’s oncology interest group, has concerns ranging from people not having a balanced diet which they need for wounds to heal, to extreme cases of people poisoning themselves using dangerous treatments.

“The diets we typically see are low in protein, and when you’re having treatment like surgery, chemotherapy or radiation therapy, your body needs more protein, so there are risks there,” he says.

“I entirely understand that people would want to do everything they possibly could to improve their chances of recovery but apart from cases of people having to be tube-fed, nutrition is not part of medical treatment.”

Dr Crews says there is the argument people are free to make choices but she argues they have to be informed accurately.

“It’s one thing to promote a diet based on the benefits it may bring to wellbeing but it becomes a different matter when those promoting a diet attribute their survival from cancer to the diet,” she says.

“In the process, it misrepresents the medical profession whose treatment may very well have brought them to where they are now.”