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BOOK REVIEW

Anticancer: A New Way of Life

By David Servan-Schreiber, MD, PhD

Viking, New York. 2008. 255 pages. Hardcover. \$25.95

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Reviewed by Daniel Redwood, DC

When he learned at age 31 that he had brain cancer, David Servan-Schreiber was a young physician and neuroscience researcher on the fast track. His devastating diagnosis changed the course of his life irrevocably, leading this very conventional doctor to explore many options he previously had scorned. With a combination of conventional and complementary approaches, he survived and undertook major lifestyle changes, eventually co-founding the Center for Integrative Medicine at the University of Pittsburgh and writing this moving and highly informative book.

Servan-Schreiber artfully succeeds at something quite difficult, sharing a compelling personal narrative while at the same time offering an evidence-based, well-referenced anticancer program involving both body and mind.

He recommends conventional chemotherapy or radiation as a first step to stave off catastrophe, combined with a lifetime commitment to well-informed, natural self-care. “In a domain like oncology,” he writes, “two things are continually changing: conventional treatments and our knowledge of what each us can do individually to reinforce the effect of these treatments.” The bulk of his book is devoted to nurturing and supporting ‘the terrain’ – the body’s underlying capacity for health and healing – primarily through the oft-cited triad of diet, exercise and stress management. Like Dean Ornish, whose work he approvingly cites more than once, he emphasizes the importance of emotional well-being as co-equal with the physical side of health.

Servan-Schreiber’s anticancer program (which he advocates for people with or without cancer) consists of an anti-inflammatory, whole foods diet (organic whenever possible, and rich in a variety of vegetables, fruits, whole grains and beans); daily or nearly daily practice of aerobic, stretching and breathing exercises; meditation; counseling and/or psychotherapy; and a potpourri of other suggestions including regular use of culinary anti-inflammatory herbs such as turmeric and sharp limits on cell phone usage. He consistently provides the latest research in support of his recommendations.

This program significantly overlaps other versions of the contemporary prevention and wellness model. To mention just two of many possible examples, Dean Ornish, in his landmark book, *Dr. Dean Ornish’s Program for Reversing Heart Disease*, and James Gordon, in *Comprehensive Cancer Care*, favor approaches quite similar to what Servan-Schreiber is proposing.

Despite these similarities, *Anticancer* is far more than a rehash of others’ work. It packs an emotional wallop that in some ways outdistances these classics. Because its author experienced first-hand the shock and awe of impending doom and because he knows how challenging it is to change long-cherished beliefs and lifestyle patterns, Servan-Schreiber speaks with an authority that is unique and perhaps unparalleled among the great works of contemporary physician-authors.

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Servan-Schreiber places great emphasis on the importance of cultivating the “anticancer body” and “anticancer mind.” Though his anticancer diet is largely plant-based, it permits moderate amounts of organically-raised, free-range animal foods. He seeks to maximize the ratio of omega-3 to omega-6 fatty acids as part of a wide-ranging anti-inflammation strategy, and therefore includes suggestions on which oils to use and avoid (with flax, canola and olive held in high esteem) and which foods to avoid like the plague (sugar, processed fats and carbohydrates, and factory-farmed or grain-fed meat, eggs and dairy). He also extols the virtues of foods low on the glycemic index. In general, this means skipping all desserts other than plain fruits, although he does speak positively of the cactus-derived sweetener, agave nectar, which is sweeter than sugar and much lower on the glycemic index. Servan-Schreiber also endorses regular intake of specific anti-cancer foods and beverages, such as green tea, berries, and anticancer herbs such as terpene-rich mint, thyme, marjoram, oregano, basil, and rosemary, and apigenine-rich parsley and celery.

Also crucial for creating the anticancer body is minimizing exposure to the countless industrial chemicals and electronic waveforms that permeate the modern world. As individuals, we are limited in our ability to change the outdoor air we breathe (though collective political action for environmental protection is within our power), but we can look closely at the products we use as well as the foods and beverages we consume. According to Servan-Schreiber, choosing the least toxic among these ranks high on the list of anticancer priorities. He singles out the following to avoid: perchloroethylene/tetrachloroethylene in dry cleaning; deodorants and antiperspirants containing aluminum; cosmetics, shampoo, lotions, gels, hair dye, nail polish and sunscreen containing estrogens or placental products or with parabens or phthalates; chemical insecticides and pesticides; and scratched Teflon pans.

The anticancer mind can be nurtured through a variety of means, including sincere and rigorous self-examination, confronting one’s fears, openness to change based on new information and insights, meditation, physical exercise, and sufficient rest and sleep.

No review of *Anticancer* should fail to mention the importance of exercise in helping prevent cancer and recover from it. Research supporting a wide range of benefits from exercise has exploded in recent years, some of it yielding strikingly specific information on the amounts of aerobic exercise needed to make a difference in recovering from particular cancers. For example, exercise needs for breast cancer are lower than for cancers of the lower bowel, which in turn are lower than what is required to have an effect on prostate cancer. As always, Servan-Schreiber provides the references, the context, and the motivational prose to get people moving, with inspiring case stories including people who continued or increased their exercise regimens even in the midst of a difficult series of chemotherapy treatments.

Anticancer is not for those seeking a single, silver-bullet answer to cancer. One comes away from Servan-Schreiber’s powerful work with the clear understanding that there is no single answer and that what is required for preventing malignancy or keeping it at bay is a deeply conscious, sustained commitment to doing what is healthy and avoiding what is unhealthy. It is certainly true that educating the public on what to do and what to avoid is crucial. But to a large extent, society’s success at stopping the cancer epidemic depends on individuals bringing their actions into harmony with what they already know to be most life-affirming. Catalyzing that change, one person at a time, may be the greatest health challenge of our era.

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