

Herbs may hold key to prostate cure

Researchers are looking toward several unconventional therapies for a cure

Pamela Fayerman Vancouver Sun

An obscure herb native to central Europe is being grown on a Richmond farm so that Vancouver prostate cancer researchers can brew it in a tea, give it to male mice and then watch what happens to their tumours.

In parts of Europe, men drink such tea for their prostate health and it is even touted as having cancer-fighting properties.

Called the small flower willow herb, it is one of numerous plants being subjected to microscopic scrutiny by research scientists at the Vancouver Centre of Excellence for Prostate Cancer.

"We're looking for the effect that the extracts in the tea extract have on prostate cancer cell growth," says Emma Guns, a pharmacologist working in the laboratories at the Jack Bell Research Centre.

No one really knows what parts of the plant -- seeds, flower, leaves or stems -- are most beneficial. That, among other things, is the subject of Guns' National Research Council-funded research.



**Ian Lindsay, Vancouver Sun /
CANCER RESEARCH, DOWN ON
THE FARM: Dr. Paul Hornby, a
biochemist and pathologist, holds
some willow herb recently harvested
at Odd Duck Herbal Research Farm
in Richmond. It is among alternative
therapies being studied to determine
their possible roles in fighting
prostate cancer.**

Guns, who is coordinating an alternative medicine program at the prostate centre -- a consortium that includes scientists at Vancouver Hospital, the B.C. Cancer Agency and the Tzu Chi Institute for Complementary and Alternative Medicine -- is also studying a metal called cesium chloride.

A prostate cancer survivor begged her to study its anti-cancer effects and is even funding the study because he attributes his survival to what is called high pH therapy.

The therapy is said to work by accumulating cesium chloride in tumours to a level that prevents them growing any further.

In another study, Guns and collaborators have their eyes on hypericin, an extract in St. John's Wort, a herb commonly used for minor depression.

The hypericin is being studied for what is called its photodynamic potential when it is allowed to accumulate in cancer cells -- to determine if, as some researchers believe, it will kill cancer cells when red light radiation is beamed at the tumour.

Questions like this were rarely asked by scientists at academic centres as the Vancouver Prostate Centre at Vancouver Hospital.

But with public interest in alternative/complementary therapies peaking, and with the federal government designation of Vancouver Hospital's prostate clinic as a federal centre of excellence, not to mention local business tycoon Jimmy Pattison's \$20 million contribution toward prostate research, unconventional therapies are now being subjected to scientific research.

Dr. Larry Goldenberg, director of the Prostate Centre at Vancouver Hospital and head of the division of urology at both VH and the University of B.C., says it is time doctors had an open mind about alternative and complementary medicines "because our patients are asking about them and they're taking them, but we have to demand that the rigours of Western science are applied so that we don't go using them based on testimonials and soft science."

"I don't want to sound like an extremist," he said, adding: "I do have an open mind, but it's strict, and patients have to make sure they consult their doctors if they want to take alternative therapies."

Several years ago, anecdotal evidence and "soft science" spurred interest in an expensive (\$11 per day) Chinese herbal preparation called PC SPES. Now, two of the most prestigious scientific journals -- the Journal of Clinical Oncology and the Journal of Urology have published studies by leading prostate cancer experts showing that the combination of eight herbs does indeed have a positive effect on

prostate cancer, presumably by stimulating the immune system, fighting inflammation and tumour activity.

PC SPES is patented and distributed by a California company called BotanicLab and was formulated by a trio of Chinese American doctors.

The herbs in the preparation are chrysanthemum, isatis, lucid ganoderma, rubescens, licorice, ginseng, scute and saw palmetto.

Guns said licorice root appears to have potent estrogenic effects and since hormone therapy is often standard treatment in many men with prostate cancer, scientists are interested in the role PC SPES may play.

In a collaboration with the B.C. Institute of Technology, Guns plans to study the chemical composition of the herbs, putting them through biological tests to determine the effects on cancer activity.

The B.C. Foundation for Prostate Disease, made up of cancer survivors, is helping to fund the research.

"A number of cases have been reported in medical journals where the amount of prostate cancer cells, as measured by the level of Prostate Specific Antigen (PSA) in the blood, has been reduced through the use of PC SPES," notes Donald Wilson, president of the foundation.

Though studies have found PSA levels can be reduced substantially when PC SPES capsules are taken by some prostate patients, toxicities and side effects associated with the herbal combination have been reported, including blood clots, a complete or near total loss of libido, impotence, breast tenderness and/or enlargement, leg cramps and diarrhea.

Goldenberg said standard hormone therapy is far cheaper than the herbal blend, but some men still prefer going the herbal route and others find their cancer progresses on standard therapy. So PC SPES may prove useful for those patients.

But for the definitive answers, he's still holding out for future studies comparing the herbal remedy with standard therapy.

Comments about this article? Send an e-mail to the [writer](#).

Send this story to...



... a friend.

Send a copy of this story to a friend.

[Click here](#).