

# Integrative Oncology

## Whole Person Care for Optimising Patient Resilience and Clinical Outcomes



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**Integrative oncology (IO) is a patient-centred field of cancer care based on a rational integration of conventional medicine with evidence-informed nutrition, lifestyle, psycho-emotional wellbeing and complementary approaches. The goal of integrative oncology is to support better quality of life, improve resilience, minimise the side effects of treatment and improve outcomes.**

### Integrative oncology

As we know, 1 in 2 people in the UK will be diagnosed with cancer during their lifespan. Beyond the need to improve outcomes, particularly in the face of dismal UK statistics compared to the rest of Europe, there is also a growing population of millions of cancer survivors with unique needs and consequent morbidity whom we need to support.

Integrative oncology (IO) offers us a broad toolkit for the complexity of cancer with a rational synthesis of the best evidence-informed approaches in conventional, nutrition, lifestyle, psychological and complementary medicine<sup>1</sup>. It is whole-person oriented and addresses the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual needs of the individual. IO offers a sense of agency and empowerment to both patients and healthcare practitioners (HCPs), supporting self-efficacy and resilience instead of learned helplessness. Through a combination of approaches in the IO toolkit we can support patients

throughout the cancer care continuum, starting with minimising cancer risk and prehabilitation for better treatment tolerance and faster recovery, through to managing side effects of treatment and supporting better clinical outcomes, as well as caring for survivors and patients with metastatic disease.

The key foundations of support in IO start with nutrition, physical activity, sleep, psycho-emotional support and stress management<sup>2</sup>. Assessing and addressing these aspects has been shown to improve quality of life and may also affect survival and recurrence risk, depending on the cancer context<sup>3-8</sup>. Alongside this, we would also look at both cancer and treatment impact to specifically alleviate symptoms and manage complications, choosing a combination of personalised interventions from an expanded toolkit that may include yoga or yoga therapy, acupuncture, and other complementary modalities<sup>2, 5, 9</sup>. We have a well-established and burgeoning body of evidence that integrative oncology approaches may improve symptom control and quality of life<sup>10-12</sup>. Going beyond that, several studies have now also demonstrated improvements in breast and gynaecological cancer survival with integrative oncology input<sup>13, 14</sup> as a promising start to building the evidence base.

While IO would ideally be delivered in a personalised, multidisciplinary team setting, where resources are limited, commissioning may consider group interventions, e.g. health coaching to support lifestyle changes (guided by qualified nutrition professionals who use up-to-date evidence), cancer exercise therapy, yoga and mindfulness-based interventions to support patients during treatment.

Safety is often seen as a stumbling block in adopting integrative oncology approaches, yet when IO is delivered under proper guidance from medical professionals through an expert multidisciplinary team, safety is placed

front and centre with a personalised assessment of risk-benefit<sup>2</sup>. However, not offering integrative oncology input, or not being open to discussions about it in conventional oncology care, places more patients at risk, as they may find unregulated poor-quality information without any evidence base online and may then conceal what they do, exposing them to unnecessary risks.

### IO in UK practice – an example

Integrative oncology is well-established in the US with many leading cancer centres providing integrative medicine input, e.g. Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, Banner MD Anderson and many others. However, it is relatively new to the UK due to the lack of resources in the NHS and lack of familiarity with this care model and IO evidence base.

At Synthesis Clinic, I run a medically led multidisciplinary, personalised medicine practice specialising in integrative cancer care. We have established cross-referral pathways with several private oncology providers, seen as expert partners providing integrated input from our team which includes medical, nutrition, physiotherapy, cancer exercise therapy and psycho-emotional wellbeing professionals. With our weekly MDT meetings to ensure alignment and effective secondary care collaboration, we deliver dynamic whole person support that is greatly valued by both our patients and our oncology partners.

Our recent breast cancer patient survey presented at the SIO Annual Conference in 2021 showed that only 25% of women attending our clinic felt that conventional care alone met their health needs. 100% of women rated their care at the clinic as very high/high quality, and all women surveyed felt that integrative cancer support has been extremely/very important in their overall care. The most common aspects identified as lacking in conventional care and better met through

the IO approach were nutrition, lifestyle and survivorship advice, personalised care, and psychological and emotional wellbeing support.

## The role of BSIO (British Society for Integrative Oncology)

BSIO (British Society for Integrative Oncology) is the leading professional organisation for integrative oncology in the UK, which I currently co-chair with my colleague, Dr Penny Kechagioglou, supported by our Executive Committee and BSIO Council. The BSIO vision is that evidence-based, comprehensive, integrative healthcare should be readily accessible to anyone affected by cancer in the UK.

BSIO provides a multidisciplinary forum for presentation, discussion and peer review of evidence-based research and treatment modality information within the context of integrative medicine. BSIO ultimately aims to provide a balanced view of the evidence to enable professionals caring for people affected by cancer in the UK to have an informed dialogue about safe and effective integrative care options, and to support patient choice and decision-making.

To achieve this goal, BSIO aims to:

- Develop and maintain a network of professionals and organisations interested in the field of integrative oncology in the UK.
- Provide education to promote dialogue between professions, enhance understanding of integrative oncology, share best practice, and promote clarity about safety, effectiveness and cost-effectiveness.
- Provide links to reliable evidence-based resources that offer high quality information on integrative oncology.
- Maintain international links, particularly with SIO (Society for Integrative Oncology), collaborating through working groups, conferences and guideline development, including the upcoming joint SIO/ASCO guideline on managing anxiety and depression symptoms in people with cancer.

As a part of our commitment to education, we organise monthly webinars on a variety of topics for BSIO members, as well as holding an annual conference, and we are working to establish a postgraduate degree in integrative cancer care.

## Summary

- Integrative oncology (IO) focuses on intelligently combining evidence-informed conventional, psychological, nutritional, lifestyle and complementary medicine in cancer care to support better quality of life, improve resilience, minimise the side effects of treatment, and improve outcomes.
- IO approaches can provide a sense of agency and empowerment to patients and HCPs with an expanded toolkit that can be used throughout the cancer care continuum.
- BSIO is the leading professional organisation for integrative oncology in the UK, aiming to improve cancer care by supporting healthcare professionals through facilitating interdisciplinary collaboration, providing educational resources with up-to-date evidence, and promoting research needed for effective integrative care.

## Further information

- 2017 ASCO endorsed SIO clinical practice guidelines on the evidence-based use of integrative therapies during and after breast cancer treatment.<sup>15</sup>
- 2022 Joint SIO-ASCO guideline on integrative medicine for pain management in oncology. (10)
- Joint SIO-ASCO guideline on managing anxiety and depression symptoms in people with cancer – due for publication in 2023.

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