

BREAKING: Health Author Suzanne Somers Mostly Wrong About Science, Medicine

By Patrice Wingert On 10/23/09 at 11:32 AM

It's the book every medical writer in the country wants to ignore. Suzanne Somers's latest "health" tome hit the bookstores this week, and this time she's offering her advice on how to cure and prevent cancer. As if people with cancer don't have enough problems. When the review copy arrived, we decided to give it a once-over—so you don't have to.

The gist of Somers's argument is that conventional cancer treatments—surgery, radiation, chemotherapy—take a destructive approach and that chemo, in particular, is overused. Long an advocate of alternative therapies, Somers argues that it makes more sense to build up the body to fight cancer than it does to tear it down through radiation and chemicals. She is particularly enamored of nutritional "cures."

Of course, Somers has had no formal medical or scientific training, but considers herself an authority—in part because she's survived breast cancer after choosing not to have chemotherapy, and because she's a regular on the alternative-medicine circuit. This book, like her others, consists mainly of transcripts of her conversations with various alternative-medicine doctors, as well as lots of details about her own experiences and prevention regimen, which she has spelled out many times before, most notably on *Oprah* earlier this year. It's noteworthy that her promotion of the book began by [publicly blaming](#) Patrick Swayze's recent death on chemotherapy, rather than his pancreatic cancer. (She has since apologized to his family.)

Cancer is a highly emotional topic, particularly since the war on cancer [isn't going particularly well](#). As my colleague Sharon Begley recently put it, "Cancer is on track to kill 565,650 people in the United States this year—more than 1,500 a day, equivalent to three jumbo jets crashing and killing everyone aboard 365 days a year." The fact is that modern medicine is far from understanding everything we need to know about cancer, and the most effective treatments available often come with nasty side effects. We all wish there were more effective and less toxic options, and we need to stay open-minded about new discoveries and alternatives. Maybe some of the doctors Somers interviewed in her book will eventually prove to be on to something.

But there is a big difference between staying open-minded and tossing aside treatments that have been proven effective after rigorous testing in favor of new "natural" therapies that have undergone much flimsier scrutiny. If you're someone who needs answers now, and want to make health decisions based on solid scientific findings rather than wishful thinking, there's not much in Somers's latest book to help you. The basic problem with the book, says Dr. Otis Brawley, the American Cancer Society's chief medical officer, "is that it's really inaccurate" when it describes the science behind current treatments and lacks a basic understanding of the scientific method. Not all research findings are equally authoritative. Just because something sounds good doesn't mean it works. "Some people confuse what they believe with what they know," Brawley said.

Even if some patients are cancer-free after following a certain treatment plan, that doesn't prove that it was the treatment that cured them, especially if no control group was used for comparison. "We're finding that about 25 to 30 percent of some cancers stop growing at some point," Brawley says. "That can make some treatments look good that aren't doing anything." Until doctors figure out how to identify which patients have cancers that won't progress, he said, the only option is to treat everyone.

Somers relies heavily on patient testimonials, but any scientist knows that talking only to those who benefited from a treatment can give less than objective results. A case in point: she lavishes praise on the research of Dr.

Nicholas Gonzalez, who uses a combination of enzymes, massive amounts of nutritional supplements (130 to 175 a day—yes, you read that right), a strict diet, and daily coffee enemas, which he says can cure pancreatic cancer. However, just about two months before Somers's book was published, the *Journal of Clinical Oncology* published the results of a controlled observational trial of Gonzalez's protocol vs. chemotherapy for patients with inoperable pancreatic cancer. The study was funded by the National Cancer Institute and enrolled 55 patients who met strict clinical criteria. A year into the study, 56 percent of those using chemotherapy were still alive, compared with only 16 percent of those who chose the enzyme therapy. In other words, those who picked chemo over the alternative treatment lived three times as long. Interestingly, the study was concluded in 2005, yet Somers doesn't mention this in the book.

Somers also shines the spotlight on Dr. Stanislaw Burzynski of Houston, whose controversial cancer treatments have resulted in years of battles with the FDA and the courts. Over the past 30 years, despite government investment, he has failed to provide compelling data that his expensive treatments work. More recently he expanded his research efforts into anti-wrinkle creams. (Side note: it is more than a little ironic that Somers is touting the work of Burzynski, who synthesizes peptides from human urine to create what he says is a cancer cure. In the books she's written about hormones, Somers has expressed nothing but disdain for FDA-approved hormones synthesized from horse urine.)

Another treatment that gets the sign of approval from Somers is mistletoe extract, which is a popular treatment in Germany, and which she credits with keeping her cancer-free for years. There are some intriguing studies, but good science requires looking at all the studies, not just the ones that support your opinion. When German scientists published a review of the data on mistletoe as a cancer treatment in 2008, they found that the evidence was "weak." Other reviews have concluded that there were quality problems with many of the studies and that more research is necessary.

Not all the recommendations Somers makes in the book raise eyebrows. She says eating healthy and exercising, reducing stress, and getting a good night's sleep may reduce the risk of cancer. That's true, but it's not news. She's right that not every woman with stage I breast cancer needs chemo. Few doctors would argue. In fact, they have the technology to calculate the size of the likely benefit, and agree that sometimes it's quite small. Most doctors offer it as a choice to women who want to do everything possible to prevent cancer's return.

"And she's right when she says that only some leukemias, lymphomas, and testicular cancers can be cured with chemotherapy," Brawley says. "We admit that many conventional treatments are not as beneficial as we would like. But that doesn't dismiss evidence that screenings have reduced the death rates of breast and colon cancer, or that the lives of other patients with cancer can be saved with early treatment or that [chemo prolongs lives](#). Even in cases of stage IV breast cancer, or lung or prostate or colon cancer, when the cancer has spread throughout the body and particularly into the bone, we can't cure people with chemotherapy, but we can prolong life and increase their quality of life. In her book, Somers completely rejects the idea that chemotherapy has any of these benefits."

When I interviewed Somers earlier this year, she said that she gets irritated when the media identify her as the former ditsy blonde from the TV sitcom *Three's Company*. She would rather be identified as an author; after all, she's written 18 books, most on the topics of weight loss (even though she's admitted to Larry King that she's used liposuction) and hormones (she recommends treatments most hormone specialists and oncologists describe as potentially risky.)

For her next book, we'd like to suggest a topic she knows very well: media manipulation. You have to love the fact that the only blurb on the back of the book ("Ms. Somers writes with the passion of the prophet"—) comes from a review trashing an earlier book. Somers's real specialty is understanding that when a celebrity writes a controversial book, it doesn't matter how much mainstream doctors and serious researchers attack it, or whether people's health is put at risk. Attacks bring publicity, and publicity sells books. Here's hoping that this time the public proves her wrong.