



WALKING MY DAUGHTER'S old dogs on a leash free area at Brunswick Heads, my reverie was shaken by the wail of a woman nearby. These dogs are usually well behaved and friendly in public, so I was surprised to see the younger one called Zoe intently sniffing the woman's leg.

Strangely, the lady showed no intention of backing away, but just seemed mesmerised, a strange fear etched on her face.

I walked over to reassure her about the dog and to whistle it back to me.

"Oh no" she said, "if a strange dog sniffs a person, it can smell cancer. I must have cancer".

I felt I had to reassure her. I told her that as a doctor living among an alternative community, I had heard of just about every mumbo-jumbo, but never this dog smelling cancer thing.

Unconvinced, she announced: "That's how my aunt discovered her cancer. Its very well known".

I couldn't leave it at that, and with our feet still in swirling seawater, I gave her some gratuitous medical advice - that if she believed in this myth so strongly, it might be a good idea to see her doctor and to request a full body CAT scan, which might detect asymptomatic cancers.

When I saw my daughter Leah to hand over the dogs, and told her of the incident, she said that "maybe Zoe did her a favour and saved her life. She's had a DOG-SCAN Dad and now you are sending her for a CATSCAN."

Dogs are very controversial in their health relationships with people.

Some people think that letting a dog lick a wound helps it to

heal, but when a casualty doctor sees a patient with a dog bite, infection is always an issue.

A granddaughter loves animals, but even a bit of dog hair around any house she visits is enough to trigger a severe allergic reaction.

Dogs aside, folklore comes from a time long before Medicare. My mother told me when she was a girl in 1930 with her large working class family in Balmain: "The worst thing any of us could do was to get sick or injured and need a doctor".

Her father treated his bad back with a hot iron over brown paper.

A lot of contemporary health myth concerns what is taken by way of food and supplements. Is there any limit to the amount of products with glowing testimonials? As all doctors know, some patients spend a fortune on charlatans, and even run into trouble with inappropriate combinations and prescription medicines. The incompatibility of St Johns Wort with antidepressants is a well-known example.

Modern vitamin pills and tonics are purchased in great quantities. Detractors say it's rubbish and the result is just yellow urine, but among the alternative medicines are there any that might be useful? On the other hand, great claims were made for now extinct preparations, which could be very harmful, such as BEX and APC powders. 'Bex is Better'.

One very old preparation has survived in a different identity. Angostura Bitters, popular as

'lemon lime and bitters' in the pub, was initially launched in 1824 as a herbal tonic for gastro intestinal disorders, because it contained Gentian in 44.7% alcohol. The familiar oversized label is a fascinating read. As a herbal medicine it has impeccable credentials - by appointment to Her Majesty the Queen. That fits. The Royal Family is well known for its predilection towards alternative medicines and homeopaths.

From the kitchen, some herbs and spices are commonly recognised as beneficial to health. Turmeric, which is in lots of Indian dishes, is said to be good for brain, sinew and heart. All very old-fashioned, but for those who believe, is there harm in open-mindedness to the fears and beliefs of patients?

Cinnamon is said to help blood pressure and the list goes on. Where problems can arise is when a patient decides to stop the prescribed Ramipril in the quest for a natural cure without talking to the doctor. It happens.

The quest for balance between 'Western' and alternatives, still in search of a name - 'complementary' or 'holistic' is still an uneasy truce. There is so much on offer and whether something is evidence-based seems to be a movable feast and about who controls the evidence.

Can we do better than follow the advice Dr Hippocrates gave so long ago?

'First, do no harm.'

Still, it's hard not to wonder how the lady at the beach got on with her CAT scan.

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