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Media Release

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Attention: News Editors/Health Writers

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Women with cancer cautious about complementary therapies

Complementary therapies are unpopular among women with gynaecological cancer, according to a study of Melbourne women.

Despite being widely used by people with other forms of cancer, a qualitative study of 53 women with mainly uterine and ovarian cancers found only one third chose complementary and alternative (CAM) medicine to either relieve symptoms of treatment or prevent recurrence of their disease.

A paper to be published in the journal "Psycho-Oncology" by researchers from the Key Centre for Women's Health in Society at the University of Melbourne, School of Population Health, and the Royal Women's Hospital, argues that there were several factors influencing women's decisions about treatment. These included low socio economic status, the lack of information in the lay media about CAM and gynaecological cancers, and late diagnosis of cancer – thus women have a trusting attitude to conventional oncology treatments.

The participants, all from the public hospital system, included 25 women born overseas who were no more or less likely to use CAM.

The most common therapies used were dietary changes, lifestyle changes, spiritual healing and yoga. Those who used CAM to manage the side effects of their chemo or radiotherapy used meditation, acupuncture, reiki and vitamins.

A co-author of the study Dr Milica Markovic said the research findings had implications for those caring for women with cancer. "We found there were four types of users of CAM- consequential users – ie those with strong ideas about alternative causes of cancer; therapeutic users, who believed in power of CAM to relieve the symptoms of their treatment: informed users who believed in the supremacy of biomedical treatments but were maximizing their general health, and exploratory users who had had limited success with biomedical treatment and were using CAM as a 'last resort' when they had a recurrence of their disease," said Dr Markovic.

"This is a small, qualitative study, so the results are not generalizable, but nevertheless point to some common themes in the stories of cancer

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patients world-wide, particularly in terms of dietary changes and stress management.

The results of this Australian study are not surprising, given that the study participants were women recently diagnosed with cancer.

This is a time when the patients are more likely to use biomedical treatments. Women also believe that being treated at a centre of excellence gives them the best chance of survival. A lack of credible information about complementary treatments for cancer leads to women accepting standard oncology care. However women who are unaware of complementary therapy choices may be missing out on the psychosocial benefits of using specific modalities," said Dr Markovic.

WHAT: National Gynaecological Awareness Day

WHEN: September 10

WHERE: Events in several states and territories

WEBSITE: www.gynsupport.com

Markovic, M Manderson L, Wray, N and Quinn M, *Complementary Medicine Use by Australian Women with Gynaecological Cancer*, *Psycho-Oncology*, <http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/cgi-bin/abstract/110520156/ABSTRACT>