

Whole Healing

Leah Vartanian chose a blend of East & West

By Emily Lenfuss

When Leah Vartanian was diagnosed with breast cancer in November of 2005, she considered her options. While a great believer in “alternative” medical care, she decided to get treatment the regular “AMA way.” The reason? She had witnessed a friend – who chose to solely use non-Western medicine to treat her cancer – die from the disease.

But that didn't mean she didn't want to use non-standard approaches to her medical care. What it did mean was she wanted to blend: to find a balance between the two. And she did. During the entire time she was treating her illness – during surgery, chemotherapy and radiation – Vartanian says she was much less sick than she could have been due to the strength of her acupuncturist's treatments and recommendations.

“Because I went to Dr. Zhao and got regular acupuncture treatments and took his herbal remedy I sailed through chemo and radiation,” she says.

Dr. Ruan Jin Zhao, president of the Center for Traditional Chinese Medicine (www.chinesemedicalscience.com), and a Scientific Advisor to the H. Lee Moffit Cancer Center, Research Institute in Tampa is the go-to doctor when it comes to cancer treatment and Chinese Medicine.

Zhao's “secret weapon” is his Chinese herbal formula – called Bing De Ling – that has been scientifically proven to increase the body's gamma interferon levels. Zhao explains that the body has two natural weapons: antibodies and cytokine. The gamma interferon falls into the cytokine family. “This is a substance that can really kill the cancer cells,” he says, adding that studies on Bing De Ling were published in the



journal DNA and Cell Biology.

In addition, acupuncture works as a tonic on the body and mind. “More and more I find acupuncture helps release the symptoms of suffering and makes it easier to go through the rough (chemotherapy and radiation) treatment,” says Zhao, who has more than 20 years of experience in the field.

Vartanian agrees. “Honestly, my treatment was chemo every three weeks. I was Looney Toons for the first week but then the next two weeks I was fine. I know it was due to the Bing De Ling and the acupuncture,” she says.

Zhao says he, like Vartanian, is an advocate of blending Eastern and Western medicine. “We have to accept that chemotherapy, surgery and radiation saves a lot of lives. I even push my patients to go the surgery,” he says.

He also encourages them to do the follow-up with short-term chemo and radiation for lumpectomies. “With

my patients I saw five cases where – without radiation – the cancer came back exactly along the wound of the cut,” he says. “I don't want to take any chances.”

An additional benefit to acupuncture treatment is that it helps calm anxiety. “When people are newly diagnosed and come to me, the acupuncture helps get rid of panic. It makes them peaceful so they can think about how to plan their treatment,” Zhao explains.

Skin Care: Feel No Burn

Another element of “alternative care” that was very helpful during Vartanian's treatment was herbal skincare. “The radiation can really cause some burns, but I didn't get any, and I have skin as white a whale's underbelly,” she says. Some of the lotions and potions she recommends are:

■ **Lavender oil**, which has natural antiseptic and anti burn qualities. Find lavender oil in some Lindi Skin care products – which are developed to ease the burden of common side effects of chemotherapy and radiation.

■ **Aloe Vera**, which increases the availability of oxygen to the skin and thereby aids synthesis and strength of the skin tissues. According to Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, recent studies suggest that some components of aloe may have anticancer effects.

■ **Shea butter**, which is high in antioxidants and Vitamin E. Vitamin E is an antioxidant that helps repair damaged skin.

Yoga Stretching

Finally, after treatment was over and Vartanian was cancer-free, she still had some effects from the surgery. “I had had a lumpectomy and the skin across my chest just felt unnaturally

tight. A friend of mine encouraged me to do restorative yoga. She said it was a nice way to reconnect with your body,” she explains.

Vartanian sought out help from Lynn Burgess, owner of Yoga From the Heart, in Sarasota (www.yoga-fromtheheart.com). “I knew Lynn before, so I went to her for a private lesson. It was very valuable and she is a great teacher. Lynn taught me what to do at home,” she explains.

“After a lumpectomy, it is important to start a yoga practice with gentle poses that bring balanced freedom of movement to the shoulder and gently stretch the chest,” explains Burgess. “Through restorative yoga poses, Leah and I created a home practice that helped her physically and fostered feelings of relaxation and a sense of well-being.

It is very important to work at recovering from surgery, Vartanian explains. “I took private lessons because I was not ready to stretch in the way you would need to in a class. The restorative yoga was what I needed,” she says.

But today Vartanian takes the regular scheduled classes at Yoga From The Heart and has gained full range of motion. “Almost everybody can get the full range of motion back, but you have to work at it, through yoga or Pilates,” she says.

Like many, the experience of breast cancer has changed Vartanian. Now cancer-free for more than three years, her perspective on her life is very different. “Before diagnosis I was a voracious, escapist reader. I would read light fiction, romance and junk. Now I only read non-fiction.”

“I'm still married to the same man. I have the same life. But now I don't want to escape it.”