

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Wine, madam, is God's next best gift to man.
— Ambrose Bierce

But is it a gift to women? Only a couple of weeks ago, the news was filled with revelations that the long-touted resveratrol was effective in preventing a wide variety of cancers in animals, and that a more potent version was being prepared for human trials. It was even on the Today show, so I knew it must be true. What is this substance and why should we care? Well, resveratrol is a natural plant polyphenol that acts as the immune system for plants and protects them from bacteria, fungi and other pathogens. It can also be purchased as a nutritional supplement as derived from the Japanese knotweed. Resveratrol is also present in red wine more so than white because of the more prolonged contact with the skins during fermentation, and it is especially present in, but not limited to, those red wines from Spain, Tuscany, and wines produced from other grapes such as the pinot noir. Thus, there have been lots of articles, many of which were published in one of the premier (and clearly unbiased) medical journals, *Wine Spectator*, on the benefits of drinking wine for obesity, Alzheimer's, heart disease, erectile dysfunction and, most importantly, lowering the risk of cancer. Indeed, some wineries are actually developing wines with enhanced levels of resveratrol. The additive apparently does not affect the taste, color, or nose of the wine.

What do we do when we have major conflicts in the information we are presented? Now we are faced with the Million Women Study from the Cancer Epidemiology Unit at Oxford University (*J Natl Cancer Inst.* 2009;101:296–305). These investigators actually followed 1.28 million women aged 50–64 years to compare the incidence of various cancers with weekly drinking habits. Their results suggested that low to moderate alcohol consumption increases the risk of certain cancers, but also decreases the risk of others. The population at greatest risk were the middle-aged, exercising, otherwise healthy, affluent women. Whether their alcohol beverage of choice be wine or otherwise, even a tempered amount of alcohol consumption increased the risk of a variety of cancers. The overall increase was 15 cancers per 1,000 women up to age of 75 years. Of considerable note and absolutely no surprise was that the increased incidence of cancers of the upper aerodigestive tract were directly associated with current smoking. However, the explanation for an increase in breast cancer is unclear.



There are several problems with this study. First, an association between alcohol and an increased incidence of breast cancer has been noted in some studies, but not in others, where the risk has actually been reduced. Moreover, the risk of developing cancer in these drinking women was not compared with non-drinkers but, instead to women who drank up to 2 drinks per week. Another problem that I see with the study is that not only was wine lumped together with other alcoholic beverages, but whites and reds were not distinguished. Women tend to be drinkers of white wines, which are low in the putative protective resveratrol.

What clearly isn't controversial is the high quality of papers within this issue of *Clinical Advances in Hematology & Oncology*. This month we have highlighted studies from the 2009 Gastrointestinal Cancers Symposium in our HEM/ONC News section. For our features, Dr. Susanne Briest explains the effects of tamoxifen metabolism on endocrine treatment; Dr. Michael Fuchsjaeger reviews the role of MRI and MRSI in the treatment management of prostate cancer. We also have expert opinion from Dr. Sundar Jagannath regarding the role of autologous stem cell transplants in multiple myeloma; Dr. Sophie Hambleton explores the profiles of varicella-zoster virus vaccinations in immunocompromised children; Dr. Monica Morrow explains the role of axillary dissection; and Dr. Samir Khleif teaches us about the FDA's Critical Path Initiative.

So, when deciding whether or not to indulge in a glass of Veuve Cliquot, women, whether they be English or otherwise, need to weigh the potential small risks of a small increase in breast cancer (for the other tumor types, another reason to stop smoking) against the benefits, including a reduction in more common causes of death, such as heart disease, stroke, hip fracture, and dementia, and the reduction in other cancers including lymphoma, renal, thyroid, and colon cancer. When I discussed this issue with my female colleagues, they all agreed that they would continue to have their wine. It clearly bubbles down to an issue of quality of life—and I will certainly drink to that!

Until next month...

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