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TWO WOMEN WITH CANCER

This paper first appeared in the Autumn edition of the 'Skeptical Intelligencer', 2014, p 2-3.

A poignant article appeared in the *Independent on Sunday* on 28.9.14 about two sisters-in-law, Debora Shipley and Gill Edwards, both of whom suffered from cancer. Over the past 14 years Mrs Woods has been diagnosed successively with tumours in her breast, bones and brain but she has survived, thanks to treatment by medical specialists at Royal Marsden Hospital. In 2009, Ms Edwards was diagnosed with breast cancer; a clinical psychologist by profession, through her writing and teaching she vigorously promoted an alternative approach to conventional medical practice called 'conscious medicine':

Conscious medicine recognises that the bodymind is an undivided whole. It sees us as conscious energy systems. And it recognises that our body is always our friend, and any symptom or dis-ease is a meaningful wake-up call. It is a call from our future self: 'Come hither! Come towards me!' It helps us see where we are stuck in old patterns or negative habits of thought, where we have put our dreams aside out of fear or guilt, or where we are not loving and honouring ourselves. And as we pay attention to its messages, and begin to transform ourselves and allow energy to flow freely again, not only does the body naturally heal; the disease also becomes a doorway to a new life. Every illness is a gift. The more serious the disease, the greater the opportunity for transformation. (And sometimes that transformation takes the form of death - which is not a failure or a tragedy. It is simply a choice to evolve in that direction.) (Note 1)

Many people will be appalled to read these kinds of ideas, or at best consider them to be luxury that adult affluent westerners might happily entertain, but hardly a message to inflict on others – babies and children or people in the developing countries who are dying of malaria, AIDS or the Ebola virus to name but three killer diseases. But Ms Edwards was someone who was likewise appalled by the 'slash, poison and burn' methods of conventional medicine. Accordingly, when her cancer was diagnosed, she rejected orthodox treatment and opted for alternative, 'holistic' methods including the Gerson diet and herbal medicine. A few months later the lump on her breast had gone and, not unreasonably she announced that this was testimony to the philosophy of conscious medicine. Unfortunately, however, her cancer returned; a lump appeared on her left breast above her heart. Again she rejected orthodox medicine, believing that her cancer 'was the result of a traumatic love affair'. Sadly, for her family, including her children, she died in 2011.

The news of Ms Edwards' death prompted hundreds of comments on her website from people from all over the world, describing how she had helped them through her writing and teaching. According to Mr Woods, 'She was a successful and popular author who touched many people's lives very positively'.

It would be easy to say how better it would have been if only Ms Edwards had believed that the alternative philosophy that she espoused did not reject outright conventional treatment. But often it's a mistake to think that you can change just one thing about a person and leave everything else the same, in this case her capacity to bring hope and comfort to others.

The story of the two women will be featured on Channel 4 on 16.10.14 in *Cancer on Trial*.

Note

1. <http://www.isbourne.org/news/92-gill-edwards-extolling-the-new-conscious-medicine>