

## **9. Watch and Wait**

The Cancer Support Community is nonprofit support center designed to provide support for adults and kids who have cancer or care for someone with cancer. The Cancer Support Community does not provide medical care — rather, the organization provides psychological expertise and support-based services that have been shown to decrease anxiety and depression, while improving other quality-of-life factors and boosting immune system response. The organization is very clear that it does not offer medical advice, nor take a stance on the “traditional vs. alternative medicine” debate.

Chanda has just come to the Cancer Support Community as a new member. She is a 20 year-old University of Michigan student, and was recently diagnosed with stage one uterine cancer. Chanda’s cancer is a very treatable cancer, and with surgery she could be totally cancer-free.

Chanda came to the Cancer Support Community to find a support group, as well as for some nutrition and exercise programs. Since her first visit, Chanda has insisted that she is opposed to medical treatment. She described that she has had some negative experiences with needles and surgeries in the past. She is extremely fearful of being hospitalized and debilitated. Moreover, she is fearful of the long-term side effects on her body image; she is convinced that if she pursues recommended medical treatment, she will feel that she is no longer a woman and no man will ever love her. She is instead opting for a “watch-and-wait” approach, combined with alternative techniques like exercise and visualization.

Chanda’s family is very worried about her. They have been actively advocating for her to receive surgery and are coming to the Cancer Support Community for help. Not only do they want Chanda to receive the treatment so that she can be cancer-free, but they also feel that Chanda is being selfish in her choices — after all, her family members will be the ones left behind if she does not live.

Chanda’s support group is also pressuring her to reconsider, and Chanda is considering leaving the group because of this. The facilitator of her support group at the Cancer Support Community is concerned that Chanda’s anxiety and depression are guiding her choices. If Chanda leaves the support group with no follow-up she is likely to continue to make decisions based on her emotional reactions.

### **Study Questions:**

1. Why do some support groups have an explicit policy not to give medical advice? What are the advantages of such a policy? What are the disadvantages?
2. Does Chanda have the right to refuse treatment in her situation? If it could be proved that her anxiety is causing her to want to avoid treatment, does she lose the right to refuse it? Under what circumstances do family members have the right to make a medical decision on someone else's behalf?
3. There are lots of people who do not seek medical help for minor ailments because they do not like going to the doctor's, because they are too busy, or because they do not want to cause a fuss. Some of them do in fact have genuine illnesses. How, if at all, is the situation of these people different from Chanda's?
4. Would things change if Chanda's condition were not life-threatening? If so, why?