According to Altmetric, which tracks the distribution and discussion of research papers online, a July article by several Yale physicians is the most-discussed paper ever published in the Journal of the National Cancer Institute (JNCI). The title of this blockbuster: “Use of Alternative Medicine for Cancer and its Impact on Survival.”

The results were clear. Patients who initially relied on conventional alternatives were, on average, 1.3 times more likely to die within the 5½ year window. Within particular cancers, the risk associated with alternative medicine was even much worse—almost six times higher for patients with lung cancer, four times for colon cancer, two times for breast cancer, twice for prostate cancer, two times for lung cancer.

The researchers found 280 such people and then compared their outcomes after 5½ years to 560 people with the same cancer, diagnosis, age, and race who had received conventional treatment.

The researchers also believe, based on their own patients, that the number of people choosing alternative treatments over conventional ones is increasing. “I understand the human impulse to think there’s got to be something else,” said Dr. Yu. “And when the answer is ‘no, there isn’t’, then there’s the opportunity for someone to say, ‘Just rub these crystals or sit in a salt bath or eat some special food.’”

All of the researchers noted that the problem should not be pinned only on patients and providers of alternative medicine. “Physicians need to shoulder some of the blame as well,” said Dr. Yu. “We need to take the time to really listen to patients’ concerns and explain things more clearly. That builds a relation of trust, and makes them more willing to believe the data.”

Dr. Yu agrees. “We need to bring these conversations about alternative therapies to the forefront,” he said, “because of this study we now have the data to help us.” The researchers also noted that their work was focused on conventional alternative medicine, when patients choose not to receive conventional medical therapies, rather than “complementary medicine,” in which patients undergo therapies from disciplines that are not part of traditional Western medicine.

The researchers know that facts and data won’t be enough to change minds, a common symptom of our time, but their paper is a start. They hope it convinces a few people to reconsider relying on alternative treatments, or prompts someone to insist that a loved one see a conventional oncologist. “That’s why we do research,” said Dr. Johnson. “We try to help people one at a time, and hopefully our research can help patients and families to make more informed decisions.”