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Amber's illness and instead sent them home with the advice not to worry.

Ms. Calistro, 27, a Milford resident, said she believes that if the disease had been diagnosed earlier, the cancer affecting her only child would not have spread as much throughout her body.

The child's problem was first noticed in September when Ms. Calistro found a lump behind the girl's right ear.

"My first instincts were that it was cancer," she said.

She took the girl to a naturopath — someone who uses nutrition to treat illnesses — and he said the lump was a calcium deposit and to come back in six or seven months.

Still uneasy, Ms. Calistro took Amber to a medical doctor who was concerned, and referred her to a pediatrician in Hartford. That doctor, she says, sent her home saying the child "looks perfectly healthy."

In the next several months, Amber went back and forth between doctors and x-ray sessions and the new diagnosis was that she had a "normal variation of bone growth."

The lump, however, was still growing and after several revisits to doctors, Amber was scheduled to have the lump removed in an upstate hospital. The surgery was cancelled twice because she came down with the flu.

It wasn't until March that Amber was finally taken to Yale-New Haven Hospital where doctors operated on her and discovered that the lump was cancerous.

Subsequent tests revealed that the tumor — which began as muscle cancer — had eroded through the bone into her brain and cancer cells were found in her spine, according to Ms. Calistro.

Doctors, she said, give the little girl a 50-50 chance of surviving a year and a 25 percent chance of surviving five years.

A program of radiation therapy in combination with chemotherapy was pre-

scribed, and two weeks ago Amber had her first three radiation treatments.

Over the objections of the child's pediatrician, Ms. Calistro last week temporarily halted the radiation treatments while she researched other treatments.

Because the radiation treatments are directed toward the girl's spine, Ms. Calistro said, the girl could be left with a shortened trunk, if she survives the illness.

Although she has agreed since to begin the radiation treatments again, Ms. Calistro has indefinitely put off the start of chemotherapy.

"We explained (to the doctor) that we were desperately searching for alternative methods," she said.

One of those alternate methods involves the use of herbs, and Ms. Calistro said, she will be talking about that later this week to a metabolic therapist who also practices acupuncture.

"We were afraid that they (doctors) might think their way is the best even though they can't prove it is," she said.