



Cancer Connections Online Monthly Forum 2007 Archive Presentation

April 2007: Palliative Care by Kathryn Borgenicht, MD, Medical Director
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PALLIATIVE CARE – WHAT IS IT AND HOW CAN IT HELP YOU

Mr. G. is a 72 year old male who has had colon cancer for some time. He is being aggressively treated with both chemotherapy and radiation therapy. During this process however, he continues to complain about frequent nausea and vomiting as well as severe back pain. His wife admits to being stressed because of being unable to handle all of his care as well as being depressed that his cancer has recurred. Neither one of them has an advance directive despite being advised to complete one by the primary care physician. Their oncologist, recognizing all of these issues asks for a palliative care consult.

What exactly is palliative medicine?

Palliative medicine provides a comprehensive approach to a patient who has a serious illness to help manage their physical, emotional, social and if appropriate, their spiritual needs. We use a team approach that work closely with a primary care provider or an oncologist to make sure the patient is getting the best symptom management possible while the patient is actively pursuing treatment for their disease. Teams vary from site to site but usually include a physician, a nurse, a social worker and a spiritual counselor all trained in palliative care and interdisciplinary work.

Why do we need palliative care?

There are many reasons for using palliative care. As a society, we are living longer with more complex diseases that need teams to help address all issues involved in these problems. While physicians are concerned about all aspects of a patient's care, they frequently don't have the time to spend pulling together all aspects one's care and need extra help. Families and patients also are becoming more sophisticated and want to make sure that symptoms and comfort are addressed while treating and trying to cure the patient's disease.

What are the benefits of palliative care?

Multiple research studies have been done concerning the benefits of palliative care. Foremost among them have been reducing patient's symptoms and improving patient and family satisfaction. Other findings include improving quality of life, easing burden on providers and caregivers, and supporting an individual patient's goals for their care.

How common are palliative care programs?

Over 800 palliative care programs exist in hospitals across the country. They are rapidly becoming standard of care for many settings as they are important in improving quality of care for patients across all settings.

How does palliative care differ from hospice care?

Palliative care can be used throughout the spectrum of a patient's disease, whether they are pursuing cure or at the end of their life. Hospice care is a specific program that uses the principles involved in palliative care but is designed for patients and their families to help them at the end of their life.

What happened to Mr. G.?

Mr. G. was seen by the palliative care team. The Palliative Care physician and nurse made recommendations that addressed and improved his pain and his nausea and vomiting. His wife was able to receive some additional emotional support and guidance regarding further resources. Both he and his wife completed an advance directive with the help of the palliative care social worker.

A final word from Helen Keller.

“Although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of the overcoming of it.”

What are advance directives and why are they important.

Advance directives are called by many different names. They are also called a living will or health care wishes. They have 2 very important parts. The first part is appointing someone to be your Durable Power of Attorney. This is the person who you want to make decisions for you when you can no longer make your own health care decisions. This is also known as your health care proxy. In most states, if you don't appoint someone they will have a hierarchy in your family of who will be the decision maker for you. The second part of an advance directive is when you discuss your own values about your life, what you think about your quality of life and what medical treatments you may or may not want. Any advance directive is taken within the context of your clinical illness and does not immediately dictate treatment. It does however provide an important guideline for your decision maker and your health care provider.

How do you prepare an advance directive?

There are many ways to do this. Most hospitals have a form of an advance directive that you can fill out on admission to the hospital. Frequently, you can just ask for a copy of one at your hospital. You do not need to see a lawyer to prepare this document. Most states do require that the document be notarized. It is then very important that you discuss the information in your advance directive with your health care provider. Many providers will ask for a copy of your directive to keep in your chart.

What happens if you change your mind?

Advance directives, while binding and an important guideline for you, your family and your provider, depend also on the clinical situation you are in. At no time does an advance directive mean no treatment. It simply gives advice about how you value your life and your health. If you appoint a durable power of attorney, can that be overturned? No, if you can no longer speak for yourself, that person you have appointed is bound by law to speak for you. No one else can legally change that voice or decision.

In a follow-up of the discussion about palliative care someone asked when should you get palliative care?

In the best of all worlds, palliative care would be an integral part of helping you take care of any serious illness from the moment you have been diagnosed with that disease. As I mentioned, these clinical situations can be very complicated and often need an interdisciplinary approach to providing the best care. Sometimes, even just meeting the team, talking about advance directives may be the best way to start with palliative care. You do not need to be critically ill to use these services, not do you need to be in serious pain or have lots of other symptoms.

Coming Next - a discussion of pain and how best to approach it.

Why is pain relief so important?

Pain puts a lot of stress on the body and mind. It prevents people from actively participating in their lives and may actually shorten one's life. It may get in the way of sleeping, eating enjoyment and every day activities. It may even make it difficult for you to participate in your cancer treatment.

Can pain be easily relieved?

There are many ways of treating pain both with medication and alternative therapies. It is very important for you to try to accurately describe and discuss your pain with your health care provider so that they can give you the best therapy. Things to consider is where is the pain, what makes it better or worse, what does the pain feel like and what has worked in the past to help with your pain.

What about getting addicted to powerful prescription medications?

Many patients and practitioners are concerned about this. However, in fact, it rarely occurs in people taking pain medications. The vast majority of people who take powerful prescription medications for pain relief are able to take their medications as prescribed and never have any difficulty controlling its use. In fact, the fear of addiction is often a bigger problem than addiction itself as this fear can keep people from asking for adequate pain relief with the result that people have to cope with harmful physical, mental and spiritual effects of the pain itself. It is often helpful to talk about this fear of addiction with your health care provider.

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What are the major side effects from pain medications?

Constipation is by far the biggest and most troublesome side effect of pain medications. If you are taking pain medications you should also take a laxative and stool softener at the same time. Sometimes people may initially feel sleepy on pain medications but this is a temporary problem

What is the best way to take pain medications?

Most pain medication should be taken round the clock as opposed to when the pain gets bad. Taking pain medication regularly helps keep the pain under better control and helps people function more comfortably.