

Psychological and psychiatric manifestations in cancer patients

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ABSTRACT

As we will show in this mini-review, there is an increased interest in the literature related to the psychological and psychiatric effects of various malignant diseases, which may be considered to have a greater impact on the patient and his family. Moreover, the psychological and psycho-social impacts of the various malignant diseases are often discussed in epidemiological literature, but still they have not been compiled yet into firm conclusions. In addition, there are very few studies, regarding these aspects for the patients with pancreatic cancer, a pathology that is very important for our research group and it will be also discussed from various perspectives in the present mini-review.

KEYWORDS

cancer, psychiatry, psychology, pancreas

INTRODUCTION

As we will show in this paper, there is an increased interest in the literature related to the

psychological and psychiatric effects of various malignant diseases, which may be considered to have a greater impact on the patient and his

family. Moreover, there are very few studies, regarding these aspects for the patients with pancreatic resections, a pathology that is very important for our research group and it will be also discussed from various perspectives in the current mini-review.

In addition, the psychological and psychosocial impacts of the various malignant diseases are often discussed in the epidemiological literature, but still they have not been compiled yet into firm conclusions.

Thus, one of the most important malignancies which was analyzed from this point of view is represented by breast cancer. In this way, in a very suggestive study by Arman *et al.*, which was conducted on 118 Swedish patients, in order to identify their perceptions regarding the reasons which had led to the emergence of the disease.

The women with cancer of the pancreas were usually well informed about their illness (1). However, the authors drawn the conclusion that women must be aware of this subject at all times, since even the medical community does not fully know about the causes and pathological mechanisms implicated in this pathology (2, 3). Accordingly, the patients also may be confused about the causes of their illness, some trying to find an explanation by themselves.

Moreover, the study group included 59 patients who received treatment in a hospital (Anthroposophical Hospital), and to which complementary therapy was added, compared to a group of 59 patients treated in a conventional Oncology Department.

The majority of women included in the study identified more than one reason for contracting the disease. Most of the interviewed women (71 %) attributed the disease appearance to their way of life. The most significant factors cited were the diet and lifestyle. A part of the women who assigned their disease to other factors than those related to lifestyle, 37 % were in the group of standard therapy and only

14 % of the patients were from the group that included the complementary psychological therapy.

For the patients who have not assigned lifestyle as a possible risk for cancer, the most important factor proposed was stress (34 %). Also, perhaps unsurprising was the assumption that 4 % of the patients considered that heredity was the only factor causing the occurrence of cancer (1).

Some insight into the disease, as provided through Internet data

As mentioned, in the pancreatic cancer, which is a pathology that is very important for our research group, due to increased mortality and reduced survival, ensuring the patient intake of information about the treatment and prognosis for life is a very serious and fundamental aspect.

In addition, currently, the Internet is a useful source, sufficient and available to anyone interested, for a wide variety of other similar diseases.

In this way, Coleman *et al.* reported a descriptive comparative study to determine the effect of posting on a web page a module of frequently asked questions about pancreatic cancer (4). 600 answers (postings) were analyzed.

Three themes were selected: searching and/or providing information, searching and/or providing support/help and reporting general condition or death by the relatives. Moreover, the information included treatments, nutrition, prognosis, terminal stage treatment, the cost of health-care, symptoms and support (social, emotional, spiritual or physical).

In this way, a variety of answers for the information searching have appeared and, although the questions about medical treatment decreased, those relating to the prognosis and the end of life have almost doubled.

In addition, there was no difference in the responses about providing support to patients.

Drug treatment was the most frequently reported, and also pain, the most common symptom reported.

Thus, this study supports the idea of creating a web site about the specific problems in pancreatic diseases and discloses the patients need for information on pain management and care in pre-terminal stages of their disease (4).

In this way, it is more and more accepted now that the Internet is an important means of communicating in connection with medical information. It was estimated that about 28 million Americans have access to the internet and thousands of medical sites have appeared.

Another example is represented by the Department of Pathology from Johns Hopkins Hospital, which has designed and maintained the Pancreatic Cancer Website. Thus, in addition to the information related to therapeutic options, research, references, doctors and consultations, the site also has a so-called „chat” room, which is active, unmoderated and where patients or those who are interested can post questions, answers, or just read the information.

In addition, Goggins *et al.* have investigated the ways and the benefits of using this web site (<http://pathology.jhu.edu/pancreas>). Thus, it was demonstrated that there were 975,978 hits to the site since its creation in 1995 (5).

Moreover, between September 1996 and March 1998, the committee responsible to answer the questions received 16,065 messages and 521,624 hits. We have to consider these numbers as being remarkable, considering that only 27,000 patients are annually diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in the USA and that most patients live only a few months on average. In this way, there is definitely a considerable need for information that cannot be entirely provided by the traditional healthcare system.

The aforementioned group also showed that, for example, in February 1998, 80 % of the hits (86/107) for discussions with the Scientific

Committee and 51 % (54/105) in other fields of the site were carried out through Internet commercial providers. Women accounted for the majority (77.2 %, 139/180) of the subjects who posted messages to the Scientific Committee.

In contrast, the study estimated that just 22 % up to 38.5 % of the world's Internet users are women.

Also, the majority (86 %, 146/169) of the participants to the discussion were relatives of patients, suggesting that the Internet represents a resource for the loved ones. 10% of the subjects (20/206) that posted messages stated that they live outside of the USA.

In addition, out of the 1541 messages posted in February, 267 (14.5 %) demanded information about pancreatic cancer, 237 (12.8 %) asked for support, 640 posts (34.1 %) brought information and 608 (33.6 %) were meant to provide emotional support. An author (R. H. H.), which regularly monitors discussions, already responded at 23 messages.

Therefore, it is becoming increasingly clear that the Internet can improve the users' knowledge about cancer. Moreover, the authors believe that such sites dedicated to a particular disease, presenting specialized information, from academic centers and/or providing up-to-date quality information are very useful for both, patients and their relatives (5).

The impact of the disease on the family

During the period following the diagnosis of a life-threatening disease, for example an advanced stage of cancer, patients find themselves in a state of crisis, with physical, social, and psychosocial effects.

Thus, most studies are mentioning that for the patients with advanced neoplasm, the prevalence of depression and anxiety is limited between 25 % and 30 % (6 – 8). Still there are a few studies that mention a prevalence up to 70 % (9). However, for these patients, the depre-

ssion and anxiety seem to decline over time, but may remain stable or increase significantly within the last six months of life. Similar aspects were also described for pancreatic cancer, the special pathology which we are interested here, as previously mentioned (10).

As mentioned before, there are only a few studies in the literature about the patients' perception for the situation of being recently diagnosed with advanced gastrointestinal cancer and, it is by no means to be neglected the impact of this news on the patients' life partners.

Thus, in a study performed on a group of 14 patients and their partners, data analysis indicated that while regarding the categories of answers of the patients and their spouses, these were similar, the number of the patients and partners who responded differed depending on categories (11).

In this way, all the patients perceived changes in everyday life that included negative psychological, mental and practical changes, but also other changes. Mental changes comprised of three categories: despair, uncertainty, as well as the lack of a valid explanation. Moreover, the subjects described several ways to overcome these problems.

The most common for the patients were along the line of „should not complain”, while for the partners to „hope”, and generally, by all participants was „to do my best”.

In addition, other ways to overcome the difficulties were represented by reconciliation, avoiding, preparing for life, seeking help and isolation.

In this way, it seems that the patients are more likely to accept the situation, rather than their family/life partners, as fewer patients than partners complained not being prepared to face death, while more partners confronted with the feeling of despair, of hope, avoiding and were concerned about the daily practical problems.

These observations suggest that, in fact, the life partners are also vulnerable and the caring staff should be advised of their situation as well, and not focus only on the patient (11).

Psychological and psychiatric manifestations for the medical staff implicated in the treatment of the cancer patients

Regarding the psychological and psychiatric problems for the medical staff engaged in the treatment of the cancer patients, we have to mention, for example, a correlational study of 51 subjects (medical staff) recruited from two hospitals in Southern California, which was carried out to explore the relationship between sleep disorders and depression on the medical personnel.

84 % were of Caucasian race, 80 % were women, 61 % were married and the medical care had an average of 16 hours per day during an average time of two years (12).

In this way, The Center for the Epidemiological Studies of Depression (CES-D) and the Pittsburgh Sleep Quality Index (PSQI) were used to measure the degree of depression and disturbances of sleep.

Most subjects (95 %) presented sleep disorders and more than half of them had depressive symptoms at a level that would suggest the risk for clinical depression appearance.

Also, there were strong correlations between the subjects depression and the sleep subscales for assaying the overall quality ($r = 0.70$; $p < 0.001$). In addition, the final regression model that includes these subscales made a prediction of 63.6 % for the variance of the scores of depression ($F = 27.32$; $p < 0.001$).

These results, which are in line with the observations made by other studies, are strongly suggesting that the medical staff in charge of the health care of patients in pre-terminal stages are exposed to an increased risk of developing clinical depression.

In this way, it is also important for nurses to be taken into account in the relationship between sleep disorders and depression and to explore the interventions that should be made to allow medical personnel to take advantage of the sleep they need without diminishing the efficiency and ability of the services provided for the patients (12).

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