Primer on Palliative Care & Symptom Management: Depression & Cancer-Related Fatigue

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Depression

- Major symptoms include depressed mood and/or loss of interest in activities, as well as other mood and physical symptoms including hopelessness, worthlessness, helplessness, sleep disturbances, fatigue, weight loss and loss of appetite.

- Common and treatable; however, the symptoms can be confused with side effects of treatment or presumed to be “expected” and temporary.

- Can be episodic
Treatment strategies

- The ideal approach is a combination of counseling and pharmacotherapy; each individual approach does provide some benefit

- Antidepressants: takes 3-6 weeks for therapeutic effect
  - SSRIs: Paxil (paroxetine), Zoloft (sertraline)
  - SNRIs: Effexor (venlafaxine), Cymbalta (duloxetine)
  - TCAs: Elavil (amitriptyline), Pamelor (nortriptyline)

- Psychostimulants: short-acting, good for immediate effects
  - Ritalin (methylphenidate)
  - Provigil (modafinil)
Distress and Depression

- Several cancer organizations are looking at general distress screening tools to identify patients who are at risk and would benefit from additional support.

- Recent literature suggests that a new cancer diagnosis as a major life stressor could increase the risk of suicide or cardiovascular death.

- Currently, there is not a standard approach or guidelines to address the needs of those patients who demonstrate high levels of distress.

Cancer-Related Fatigue (CRF)

- Common amongst patients who are undergoing chemotherapy and radiation (90% of those patients), but easily overlooked as an “expected” symptom
- Severe tiredness or decreased energy that is out of proportion to activity
- Does not respond to rest alone
- One of the toughest symptoms to treat with multiple contributing factors
Treatment approaches

- Treat any contributing conditions: anemia, depression, pain are major culprits

- Behavioral interventions:
  - Exercise (aerobic), physical therapy
  - Strategies for energy conservation
  - Sleep hygiene

- Medications
  - Ritalin (methylphenidate)
  - Provigil (modafinil)