

Letters

High Symptom Burden Among Patients With Newly Diagnosed Incurable Cancer in a Developing Country

To the Editor:

Palliative care (PC) is ideally integrated into the care of patients with incurable cancer as early as a diagnosis is made.¹ This is supported by the evidence that earlier PC is associated with significantly better patient-reported outcomes.² Many cancer patients, especially in developing countries with limited resources, present in an advanced incurable stage and the only realistic treatment option for them is PC.¹ Although PC is needed most in developing countries, little evidence to illustrate the need for PC and its early integration comes from these countries.³

A good number of studies describe the symptom burden in patients with incurable cancer.⁴ However, to the best of our knowledge, none of these studies systematically assess the prevalence of symptoms in patients with newly diagnosed incurable cancer in a developing country.

The aim of this study was to describe the prevalence and severity of symptoms among patients with newly diagnosed incurable cancer in an Egyptian cancer center as an example for a developing country setting.

Methods

The study included 89 adult (>18 years) patients with newly diagnosed incurable cancer presenting to an Egyptian cancer center from March to October 2015. Incurable cancer was defined as advanced cancer for which the treatment plan is palliative anticancer therapy or supportive care only. New diagnosis was defined as within one month of confirmed diagnosis of incurable cancer.

A list of 57 symptoms was developed for the purpose of this study based on a systematic review of symptoms in incurable cancer patients and a list developed by Homsy et al. to assess symptoms systematically in a PC population.^{4,5} The list of symptoms was translated to Egyptian Arabic slang and revised

and approved by three native Egyptian Arabic-speaking oncologists.

Because a significant proportion of our patients are illiterate, the questionnaire was not self-administered and all patients were interviewed by investigators (R. R. and R. F.) to complete the questionnaire. Patients were asked initially to voluntarily report the symptoms they were experiencing and to name the most annoying one using open-ended questions. This was followed by the systematic assessment of 57 symptoms. Symptoms were rated using a four-point verbal rating scale (none, mild, moderate, and severe). If the patient reported multiple pains, the pains were considered one entry; the one with the highest degree of severity was used.

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Kasr Al-Ainy Center of Clinical Oncology and Nuclear Medicine, Kasr Al-Ainy School of Medicine, Cairo University. All approached patients agreed to participate in the study and gave verbal informed consent.

Statistical methods were performed using SPSS, version 14 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL).

Results

The median patient age was 53 years, 42% were female and 34% were illiterate. The primary cancer site was gastrointestinal in 26% patients, central nervous system in 21%, lung in 14%, soft tissue and bone in 12%, head and neck in 7%, and others in 20%. Eighty percent of patients had locally advanced disease and 34% had evidence of distant metastases. The treatment plan was palliative anticancer therapy in 94% patients and supportive care only in 6%.

The average number of symptoms per patient was 16.8 and the median was 15 (range 1–43). The number of symptoms was 1–10 in 26% of patients, >10–20 in 40%, >20–30 in 27%, and >30 in 7%. The total number of symptom entries was 1498, of which 11.8% were voluntarily reported by patients and 88.2% were detected by the systematic assessment. The number of moderate/severe symptoms was 0 in 1% of patients, 1–5 in 33%, 6–10 in 33%, and >10 in 34%.

Pain was the most common symptom to be rated as severe (33% of patients) followed by appetite loss (19%), fatigue (19%), weight loss (17%), insomnia (17%), and weakness (14%). [Table 1](#) illustrates the

prevalence and severity of the systematically assessed 57 symptoms. In addition, patients voluntarily reported another nine symptoms ([Table 2](#)). The severity was mild in 42% of symptom entries,

Table 1
Prevalence and Severity of the Systematically Assessed 57 Symptoms

Symptom	Mild		Moderate		Severe		Total		Voluntarily Reported Entries	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Appetite loss	15	17	28	32	17	19	60	67	5	8
Weight loss	18	20	24	27	15	17	57	64	2	4
Pain	7	8	19	21	29	33	55	62	46	84
Anxiety	18	20	27	30	9	10	54	61	0	0
Fatigue	14	16	23	26	17	19	54	61	8	15
Dry mouth	29	33	14	16	8	9	51	57	1	2
Depressed mood	20	23	16	18	11	12	47	53	0	0
Insomnia	15	17	15	17	15	17	45	51	1	2
Weakness	14	16	19	21	12	14	45	51	11	24
Drowsiness	13	15	21	24	8	9	42	47	0	0
Headache	14	16	18	20	9	10	41	46	10	24
Nervousness	22	25	9	10	10	11	41	46	0	0
Heartburn	12	14	16	18	12	14	40	45	3	8
Early satiety	16	18	14	16	8	9	38	43	0	0
Bloating	23	26	7	8	7	8	37	42	1	3
Dizziness	19	21	13	15	5	6	37	42	0	0
Cough	14	16	16	18	6	7	36	40	8	22
Nausea	16	18	11	12	5	6	32	36	0	0
Shortness of breath	8	9	10	11	12	14	30	34	12	40
Belching	18	20	6	7	5	6	29	33	2	7
Visual problems	15	17	11	12	3	3	29	33	8	28
Numbness/tingling	11	12	13	15	4	5	28	32	3	11
Constipation	10	11	9	10	8	9	27	30	3	11
Difficult swallowing	9	10	11	12	6	7	26	29	1	4
Forgetting	10	11	12	14	4	5	26	29	1	4
Burning urination	15	17	7	8	3	3	25	28	0	0
Hearing problems	12	14	10	11	2	2	24	27	2	8
Taste change	14	16	8	9	2	2	24	27	0	0
Fever	12	14	10	11	1	1	23	26	2	9
Indigestion	12	14	7	8	3	3	22	25	0	0
Sweating	12	14	3	3	7	8	22	25	0	0
Vomiting	10	11	9	10	3	3	22	25	4	18
Confusion	10	11	6	7	5	6	21	24	2	10
Difficult concentration	10	11	6	7	3	3	19	21	0	0
Edema, leg	8	9	7	8	4	5	19	21	1	5
Chills	9	10	5	6	4	5	18	20	0	0
Sore mouth	11	12	3	3	4	5	18	20	0	0
Hoarseness	11	12	3	3	3	3	17	19	0	0
Tumor/swelling	2	2	9	10	6	7	17	19	9	53
Frequent urination	9	10	3	3	4	5	16	18	0	0
Tremors	11	12	4	5	1	1	16	18	2	13
Bad dreams	10	11	5	6	0	0	15	17	0	0
Hiccup	8	9	2	2	5	6	15	17	0	0
Hot flashes	9	10	6	7	0	0	15	17	0	0
Itching	3	3	6	7	5	6	14	16	1	7
Black out	7	8	4	5	2	2	13	15	0	0
Difficult urination	9	10	1	1	2	2	12	14	0	0
Bleeding	6	7	4	5	1	1	11	12	2	18
Edema, arm	7	8	2	2	1	1	10	11	0	0
Diarrhea	5	6	2	2	1	1	8	9	1	13
Incontinence, urine	3	3	1	1	4	5	8	9	3	38
Incontinence, stool	2	2	1	1	4	5	7	8	2	29
Other skin symptoms	3	3	2	2	1	1	6	7	1	17
Convulsions	0	0	3	3	2	2	5	6	0	0
Hallucination, visual	3	3	1	1	0	0	4	5	0	0
Hallucination, auditory	3	3	1	1	0	0	4	5	0	0
Hallucination, tactile	2	2	0	0	0	0	2	2	0	0

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