Clinics in Oncology

Commentary
Published: 18 Mar, 2024

The Grey Area of Palliative Care: ICU Considerations in Advanced Cancer

Stecca C*

Division of Medical Oncology and Hematology, Mackenzie Evangelical University Hospital and Parana Oncology Center, Brazil

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It was an ordinary Thursday afternoon in the clinic, bustling with the typical rush of appointments and rounds. Amidst the chaos of managing twelve segments and attending to two new patients, I received an unexpected summons from the medical director. As I entered his office, the absence of a comforting cup of coffee signaled the seriousness of our impending conversation.

Seated across from the director, I braced myself for the directness of his inquiry. The topic at hand? My recent encounter with a middle-aged woman diagnosed with advanced small cell lung cancer. Just days into her chemotherapy regimen, she experienced a rapid decline, prompting my decision to transfer her to the Intensive Care Unit (ICU).

Facing skeptical glances from the ICU staff, I found myself once again defending the rationale behind my decision. In a resource-limited setting, advocating for critically ill metastatic cancer patients often requires navigating misconceptions and justifying the pursuit of aggressive interventions.

Years later, in a different city and a different hospital setting, a similar scenario unfolded. This time, it was a young man battling metastatic sarcoma, who had just started his first chemotherapy cycle and was unfortunately admitted to ICU for treatment of a severe infection. Yet, the call from my ICU colleague questioning the appropriateness of intensive care for a "palliative" patient echoed hauntingly.

Reflecting on these encounters, it becomes evident that the term "palliative" fails to capture the nuances of modern oncology care. While historically synonymous with end-of-life treatment, the landscape of metastatic cancer management has evolved dramatically. Advances in therapy have prolonged survival for many patients, sometimes blurring the lines between palliative and curative intent.

As medical oncologists, we must challenge outdated perceptions and embrace the complexity of metastatic cancer care. It is not a matter of abandoning patients to their fate or lazily sidestepping difficult conversations. Rather, it is about recognizing the potential for meaningful treatment response and affording every patient the dignity of hope.

In redefining our approach to palliative care, we not only honor the resilience of our patients but also strive to cultivate a culture of compassion and understanding within our medical community. It is imperative that we educate our colleagues, particularly ICU physicians, about the nuances of metastatic cancer care. By dispelling misconceptions and fostering collaboration, we can ensure that every patient receives the comprehensive and compassionate care they deserve, even in the face of metastatic disease.

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***Correspondence:**

Carlos Stecca, Division of Medical Oncology and Hematology, Mackenzie Evangelical University Hospital and Parana Oncology Center, Cutibia, Parana, Brazil

Received Date: *29 Feb 2024*
Accepted Date*: 11 Mar 2024*
Published Date*: 18 Mar 2024*

Citation:

Stecca C. The Grey Area of Palliative Care: ICU Considerations in Advanced Cancer. Clin Oncol. 2024; 9: 2062.

ISSN: 2474-1663

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