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Perspectives on Coping Among Patients With Head and Neck Cancer Receiving Radiation

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Head and neck cancer (HNC) accounts for 3% of all cancers in the United States and is twice as common in men compared to women (National Cancer Institute [NCI], 2011). The incidence in the United States was estimated to be 52,000 new cases in 2011 (NCI, 2011). Treatment for HNC is multimodal, including surgery, radiation, and often chemotherapy. Patients' illness experiences involve physical symptoms, side effects from treatment, symptom distress, and psychological distress (Archer, Hutchison, & Korszun, 2008; Haman, 2008). Patients also experience uncertainty about the effectiveness of an unfamiliar treatment, their ability to manage daily living, and long-term effects of the disease and treatment (Rose & Yates, 2001). Because of uncertainty, each patient perceives illness, cognitively appraises his or her situation, and copes with illness differently (Mishel, 1988).

Patients with HNC experience an array of physical symptoms resulting from their cancer and its treatment (Chandu, Smith, & Rogers, 2006). Symptoms related to side effects of radiation include dysphagia, xerostomia, pain, fatigue, altered taste, mucositis, skin changes, and weight loss (Olmi et al., 2003; Khoda et al., 2005). Symptoms related to side effects of chemotherapy include difficulty swallowing, anemia, nausea, neutropenia, diarrhea, and mucositis (Lambertz, Robenstein, Mueller-Funaiole, Cummings, & Knapp, 2010; Schrijvers, Van Herpen, & Kerger, 2004). Patients with HNC may experience several of those symptoms and side effects at any time during their treatment.

Symptom distress is defined as the degree or amount of physical or mental upset, anguish, or suffering experienced from specific symptoms (Rhodes & Watson, 1987). Few researchers have examined symptom distress among patients with HNC. Lai et al. (2003) reported that

Purpose/Objectives: To describe coping among patients with laryngeal and oropharyngeal cancer during definitive radiation with or without chemotherapy.

Research Approach: Qualitative content analysis conducted within a larger study.

Setting: Two radiation oncology outpatient clinics in Baltimore, MD.

Participants: 21 patients with oropharyngeal or laryngeal cancer.

Methodologic Approach: Interviews with open-ended questions were conducted during treatment. Questions covered topics such as coping during treatment, treatment-related issues, and resources.

Main Research Variables: Coping, treatment, and coping resources.

Findings: Patients' self-assessments suggested they were coping or that coping was rough or upsetting. Issues that required coping varied over four time points. Physical side effects were problematic during and one month after treatment completion. Patients used coping to manage the uncertainties of physical and psychological aspects of their experience. Family and friend support was a common coping strategy used by patients, with the intensity of side effects corresponding with the support provided across time points.

Conclusions: Findings confirm previous research, but also provide new information about ways in which patients with head and neck cancer cope with their illness experience. Emergent themes provide insight into patients' feelings, issues, and assistance received with coping.

Interpretation: Patients with head and neck cancer need education on the amount and severity of side effects and should be appraised of potential difficulties with scheduling, driving, and other logistic issues. Patients also should be informed of helpful types of support and coping strategies. Additional research is needed to expand the findings related to patients' coping with treatment and to explore the experiences of family and friends who provide social support.