Prostate Cancer Recurrence Fear: The Prostate-Specific Antigen Bounce

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Prostate cancer is the most common cancer in American men. Those who choose external beam radiation therapy or ultrasound-guided prostate brachytherapy (seed implant) as treatment for early-stage prostate cancer may experience a benign rise in prostate-specific antigen (PSA) values after treatment. This phenomenon has been identified in the literature as the “PSA bounce,” which can be mistaken for a rise in PSA resulting from biochemical failure. The PSA bounce can be a major source of anxiety for patients and families and can create diagnostic challenges for clinicians. Additional study is needed to explain its occurrence. Clinicians should be aware of this complex phenomenon, observe PSA values, and account for the PSA bounce in post-treatment management of their patients. Patient education and psychosocial support can be helpful for patients and families when PSA values rise after radiation treatment.

Key Words: prostate specific antigen, prostatic neoplasms/blood, tumor markers/biological, external beam radiotherapy

The purpose of this article is to describe the PSA bounce and PSA use in surveillance after prostate cancer treatment. Clinical and psychosocial implications of the PSA bounce will be presented with implications for nursing practice.

Case Study

P.C., a 66-year-old Caucasian man, had a routine screening PSA drawn at a primary care office in November 1999. Although his PSA had been within normal limits (i.e., 4.0 ng/ml) on previous occasions, this time, it was elevated to 7.1 ng/ml (Morey, 2000). A nodule was palpated in the right zone of the prostate during a digital rectal examination (DRE). A subsequent transrectal ultrasound and biopsy of the prostate revealed a mildly enlarged 31 g prostate, whereas a normal prostate measures 20 g (Grimm et al., 1997). His ultrasound also showed a 1.5 cm hypoechoic nodule in the right transition zone. Final pathology revealed a Gleason grade 3 + 3 adenocarcinoma in the right base and right midgland. Aside from his chronic arthritis, the patient felt healthy and had no urinary symptomatology. He denied weight loss, new bony aches or pains, or bowel problems. When P.C. presented for discussion of treatment options, he had difficulty understanding that he was seriously ill. Although he was cognizant that his prostate cancer had been detected early, he nevertheless was facing treatment decisions for a disease that had caused no symptoms.

P.C. was a good candidate for a radioactive seed implant because he was healthy and had an excellent performance status. His PSA was less than 10, and his Gleason score was 6 (3 + 3) or moderately differentiated. He underwent iodine-125 seed implant in early 2000. The implant went well, and he returned to his baseline activities within a week after the procedure. His first post-treatment PSA blood test was drawn one month later and had dropped to 1.4 ng/ml, indicating an excellent response to therapy. Subsequent serial PSA blood tests...