Improving the Quality of Cancer Pain Management in an Academic Medical Center Emergency Department

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The impact and outcomes of the implementation of a pain management guideline and pain assessment standard operating procedure (SOP) in a cancer-specific emergency department are evaluated in this article. After implementation of the SOP, the number of pain assessments conducted per patient during hospitalization increased, as did the percentage of patients who underwent a pain assessment at admission, within one hour after analgesic medication was administered, and at regular intervals.

The Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare’s healthcare accreditation program for hospitals includes pain management standards as one of the evaluation items. However, the scope of the evaluation is limited to the inpatient setting, leaving outpatient pain management less standardized or regulated. In addition, very few reported studies have evaluated the management of cancer pain in the outpatient setting, particularly in the emergency department (ED), where patients presenting with pain may be neglected because of a high priority being placed on urgent and life-threatening conditions.

Pain assessment and management

The SOP for pain assessment is mandated once every eight hours, at admission and discharge, whenever patients report pain, and within one hour after the administration of analgesic medication. The pain management guideline contains five basic principles: (a) use of oral medication when available, (b) adherence to the WHO (1990) three-step ladder approach (http://bit.ly/inhN), (c) use of regular, time-release analgesics for the prevention of pain recurrence, (d) prescription of...