Bowel Obstruction and Delirium: 
Managing Difficult Symptoms at the End of Life

Maureen Lynch, MS, APRN-BC, AOCN®, ACHPN, Constance Dahlin, APRN-BC, ACHPN, FAAN, and Marie Bakitas, DNSc, APRN, AOCN®, FAAN

Palliative care has become an essential component of oncology care, with a focus on maximizing quality of life and optimizing function, as well as promoting pain and symptom management. This article focuses on the care of a patient experiencing bowel obstruction and delirium, two common issues in patients with advanced cancer, and demonstrates the integration of palliative care and oncology care to achieve an individualized care plan. Management focuses on identifying and treating reversible causes and improving quality of life while respecting the patient’s values and goals. Sometimes the causes are not easily identified or treatment of the cause may impair quality of life, at least temporarily. At other times, the causes may be irreversible and the focus is exclusively on quality of life. Determination of best care for individual patients requires synthesis of data from holistic assessment, including the patient’s goals of care and values, as well as knowledge of the patient’s disease state with evidence-based approaches to management.

Maureen Lynch, MS, APRN-BC, AOCN®, ACHPN, is a nurse in Palliative Care at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute and Constance Dahlin, APRN-BC, ACHPN, FAAN, is a palliative care practitioner and consultant, both in Boston, MA; and Marie Bakitas, DNSc, APRN, AOCN®, FAAN, is an associate professor and nurse practitioner in the Section of Palliative Medicine and Department of Anesthesiology at Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center in Lebanon, NH. The authors take full responsibility for the content of the article. The authors did not receive honoraria for this work. The content of this article has been reviewed by independent peer reviewers to ensure that it is balanced, objective, and free from commercial bias. No financial relationships relevant to the content of this article have been disclosed by the authors, planners, independent peer reviewers, or editorial staff. Lynch can be reached at mylynch@partners.org, with copy to editor at CJONEditor@ons.org. (First submission August 2011. Revision submitted October 2011. Accepted for publication November 1, 2011.)

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Symptoms may be difficult to manage in patients with advanced cancer because of multifaceted etiologies; complex psychosocial patient and family dynamics; conflicting goals of care and treatment; and limited management options related to patient factors (e.g., medication allergies, comorbidities), high cost, and loss of care to care. Managing difficult symptoms often is a catalyst for palliative care consultation. Although palliative care is often believed to be synonymous with end-of-life care, its primary focus is on improving quality of life, maintaining optimal function, and offering the presence of hope, regardless of the stage of disease. Palliative care has become an essential element of oncology care endorsed by the National Cancer Institute (2008), National Comprehensive Cancer Network (2012), and American Society of Clinical Oncology (Smith et al., 2012). This article presents a case study as an example of integrating palliative care and oncology care around management of bowel obstruction and delirium, two common symptoms seen in patients with advanced disease.

Palliative care is defined as an approach that seeks to improve quality of life and relieve suffering for patients and families who are living with life-threatening illness (National Consensus Project for Quality Palliative Care, 2009; National Quality Forum, 2006; World Health Organization, 1990, 2012). Palliative care focuses on addressing physical, psychosocial, intellectual, and spiritual needs of patients and families throughout the continuum of illness. In particular, care centers on the relief of physical symptoms, support in psychosocial and emotional concerns, discussion of spiritual and existential distress, and advanced care planning. Unlike hospice care, which is limited by a six-month prognosis, palliative care is not restricted to a particular diagnosis or treatment type and may begin at diagnosis. Studies have demonstrated that early integration of palliative care with oncology care benefited patients and families by improving patient-reported quality of life and mood (Bakitas et al., 2009; Temel et al., 2010). Early integration of palliative care also has led to increased documentation of resuscitation preferences, less aggressive care at end of life, and higher survival rate (Bakitas et al., 2009; Connor, Pyenson, Fitch, Spence, & Iwasaki, 2007; Temel et al., 2010). Palliative care acknowledges that symptoms disrupt function and create distress and suffering on many levels for both patients and their families. Comprehensive assessment of symptoms and suffering includes ascertaining relevant information about a patient’s background, values, family relationships, understanding of illness, goals of care, preferences for life-sustaining measures, and...