A Changing Paradigm for Cancer Treatment: The Advent of New Oral Chemotherapy Agents

Cindi Holt Bedell, RN, MSN, OCN®

The development of numerous oral chemotherapy agents has led to a new paradigm in cancer treatment. Oral chemotherapy can be self-administered conveniently, so patients with cancer can receive their treatments in their homes instead of in a supervised and controlled healthcare environment. Cancer now is recognized as a treatable chronic disease, and new oral chemotherapy agents have been developed that offer targeted cancer treatment. Although the newer oral chemotherapy agents offer additional treatment options, they also pose challenges for patients and healthcare providers. Patient adherence and monitoring can be challenging, and reimbursement issues abound. Oncology nurses play a key role in assessing, educating, and monitoring patients receiving oral chemotherapy. In addition, they may be involved in assisting patients with obtaining reimbursement and, in some cases, may be instrumental in locating patient assistance programs. This article discusses patient care issues related to treatment with oral chemotherapy agents and provides a historical overview of their development and use.

Key Words: antineoplastic agents, pharmaceutical preparations

Oral agents also are effective and can control cancer and increase survival time and quality of life.

Despite the demonstrated effectiveness of oral chemotherapy agents, misconceptions about them abound among patients as well as some healthcare providers. One perception is that oral chemotherapy represents an inferior treatment or even palliative care, because patients have difficulty comprehending that a pill can be as “strong” as IV chemotherapy or that a single capsule of oral chemotherapy can be as effective as a multidrug IV chemotherapy treatment. Therefore, patients must be educated about the efficacy and potency of oral chemotherapy agents. When patients misunderstand or underestimate these factors, they are at increased risk for poor compliance with self-administration.

Some newer agents actually have greater efficacy than the IV chemotherapies that historically have been used to treat a particular cancer. For example, the oral agent imatinib mesylate is superior to cytarabine chemotherapy and interferon as first-line therapy for patients with newly diagnosed chronic myeloid leukemia (CML) (O’Brien et al., 2003).

Additional challenges occur as a result of viewing cancer as a chronic disease. Patients may need assistance staying engaged in the workforce and may need supportive care when they travel...