Journal Watch

An Observational Study of Oncology Patients' Utilization of Breakthrough Pain Medication

Presented by: Kirsten Barnes Family Medicine Resident during morning rounds at the Tertiary Palliative Care Unit, May 22, 2008.

Reference:
Journal of Pain and Symptom Management Volume 35, Issue 4, April 2008, Pages 406-411Andrew N. Davies MB BS, MSc, MD, FRCP, Joanna Vriens MB BS, MRCP, Alison Kennett RGN and Michelle McTaggart BSc (Hons)
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Abstract:
The aim of this study was to determine utilization of breakthrough pain medication among a community-dwelling group of oncology patients. The subjects were recruited from patients attending the oncology outpatient department and oncology day unit. The protocol involved completion of a study-specific proforma: the information collected included demographic information (i.e., age, gender), cancer diagnosis, background cancer pain management, breakthrough pain characteristics (i.e., frequency, duration, intensity), and breakthrough cancer pain management. One hundred twenty patients participated in the study. Eighty-seven patients were experiencing breakthrough pain, although only 81 patients had been prescribed a strong opioid as breakthrough medication. Three patients had never taken the breakthrough medication, because of concerns about overdosing, concerns about tolerance, and absentmindedness about the existence of breakthrough medication. Of the remaining patients, 15 used the opioid every time they experienced breakthrough pain, whereas 63 used the opioid only some of the times they experienced breakthrough pain. The patients' impetus for taking breakthrough medication varied (e.g., onset of pain, duration of pain, intensity of pain), and the patients' reasons for not always taking breakthrough medication also varied (e.g., lack of intensity of pain, side effects of breakthrough medication, concerns about side effects of breakthrough medication). This study confirms that most patients do not take breakthrough medication every time they experience breakthrough pain. It also identified educational needs around the management of breakthrough pain for both patients and health care professionals.
Key Words: Neoplasms; pain; breakthrough pain; episodic pain

Strengths:
- Study has well defined inclusion/exclusion criteria
- Prospective study
- 5 months long – quite adequate considering patient population
- Variety of parameters assessed

Weaknesses:
- Small study
- Observational study based on subjective patient responses
- Patients were not similar with respect to treatments or disease

- Would be helpful to know characteristics of those 15 patients that took the breakthrough analgesia every time they had pain (i.e.) did they have a certain type of cancer, more advanced disease, etc.

Relevance to Palliative Care:

- Breakthrough pain is a common problem in patients with pain (40-80% of patients with cancer pain) and these patients make up the bulk of our population
- This is the first study to describe in any detail the phenomenon that most patients do not use breakthrough analgesia regularly for pain
- The study emphasizes the importance of improved patient education about the use of breakthrough analgesia and need for improved education of health care providers.