

High prevalence of pain in patients with cancer in a large population-based study in The Netherlands

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Abstract:

At present, no definite conclusions can be drawn about the real extent of the pain suffered by cancer patients. A population-based study was conducted to obtain reliable information about the prevalence and severity of pain in cancer patients (all phases) and about predictors of pain. A representative sample of cancer patients was recruited in the area from a cancer registry. Pain was assessed by the Brief Pain Inventory (BPI). Adequacy of pain treatment was assessed with the Pain Management Index (PMI). We found that 55% of the 1429 respondents had experienced pain past week; in 44% (n=351), the pain was moderate to severe (BPI score \geq 4). Total prevalence of pain/moderate to severe pain was present in 49%/41% in patients with curative treatment \geq 6 months ago, 57%/43% in patients with current curative treatment or treatment $<$ 6 months ago, 56%/43% in patients with current palliative anti-cancer treatment and in 75%/70% in patients for whom treatment was no longer feasible. Positive predictors of the prevalence of pain were lower education level, more advanced disease and haematological (excluding (non)-Hodgkin lymphoma), gastro-intestinal, lung, or breast malignancies. According to the PMI, analgesic treatment was inadequate in 42% of the patients. Negative predictors of adequate treatment were current curative anti-cancer treatment and low education level. **CONCLUSION:** A substantial proportion of cancer patients does suffer from moderate to severe pain and does not receive adequate pain treatment.

Comments:

Strengths/uniqueness:

This report includes a relatively large patient sample of cancer patients in four different categories of disease status. Validated outcomes were used in the measurement of pain and pain management outcomes.

Weakness:

The cohort of patients with advanced disease is relatively small compared to the other three disease groups. Although pain was apparently rated as now, over the last week, least, worst, and average, it is not clear which pain intensity measurement was used in the statistical analyses.

Relevance to Palliative Care:

The significant percentage of patients reporting moderate to severe pain certainly highlights the need to continue to evaluate the adequacy of cancer pain assessment and management. This highlights the need for ongoing educational initiatives and further of improved outcomes. This study would be enhanced by further information with regard to the cancer pain syndromes of this patient population that could be provided by the use of an assessment tool such as the Edmonton Classification System for Cancer Pain (ECS-CP).