

Journal Watch
Skin Care
Skin Findings in Palliative Care Patients

Presented by: Robin Fainsinger, September 23, 2008 on the Tertiary Palliative Care Unit, Grey Nuns Hospital during morning rounds.

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Abstract:

The prevalence of dermatologic disease and its effect on quality of life has not been well studied in patients with advanced illness. We sought to describe skin findings in inpatient palliative care patients and determine how often they are addressed by the primary or palliative care teams. We collected patient demographic and clinical data from the medical record, performed total body skin examinations, and determined how often significant cutaneous findings were documented in the chart. We also characterized skin findings as uncomfortable and treatable. Twenty palliative care patients participated in the study over a 2-month period. Common findings included skin breakdown (20/54; 37%), skin infections (14/54; 26%), inflammatory dermatoses (9/54; 17%), and skin conditions related to systemic disease (7/54; 13%) or treatment of systemic disease (4/54; 7%). Primary or palliative care clinicians did not document most of these conditions. Eighty percent of the patients had uncomfortable, but treatable skin conditions of which 62% (13/21) were undocumented or incorrectly documented. These limited data suggest the need for palliative care clinicians to conduct more complete skin examinations, and to improve their knowledge of common skin abnormalities in patients with serious illness. A larger scale investigation of skin disease and its effect on quality of life in the palliative care population is warranted.

Strengths

This is an original report that looks at the seldom-researched issue of skin pathology in palliative care populations.

Weaknesses

This is a small patient cohort of a much larger sample of excluded patients. The research is limited to a consult service in an acute care hospital.

Relevance

The extent of missed and under treated skin pathology should encourage all palliative care groups to make an effort to improve the documentation & management of treatable skin problems in this population. This is a credible start that should encourage further research in this theme.