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Dentistry's Supporting Role for Cancer Patients



By Christopher J. Smiley DDS
Editor-in-Chief

Receiving a cancer diagnosis creates a flood of issues that often result in patients and caregivers becoming lost in a fog.

I know — I was there when my wife's physician called her with the news, and she was admitted to the hospital that same day, a place where she remained for more than three months. Recently we celebrated her fifth year following a successful bone marrow transplant. Although she is now considered healthy, we shudder to this day, remembering how overwhelming it was to navigate the minefield that comes with a diagnosis of cancer.

Concern for how to deal with family and work obligations is soon overtaken by doing what's necessary to survive. The patient is on a journey of diagnostic tests, office visits, hospitalization, and medical interventions, often with side effects that need to be anticipated and addressed along the way.

Oral health care providers have an essential role to play in supporting their patients during this time. Often, the dental team's involvement is initiated by a letter from an oncology nurse or physician requesting a dental release for a patient to begin cancer therapy. This typically requires a comprehensive exam with a current set of radiographs to identify compromised teeth, periodontal and endodontic infection, and the need for treatment of decay and disease conditions. Even the presence of low-level infection can become problematic during chemo and radiotherapy, so a dental cleaning to reduce oral bacterial load often is requested as part of a timely treatment plan of dental issues to address before release. This is also a time for oral health counseling to share information on home care to reduce caries risk, cope with anticipated side effects from medications, and to address mucositis.

How aggressive a plan should be in addressing questionable teeth and tissues can be a subjective question that requires a firm understanding of the cancer

diagnosis and planned therapy. The field of focus for radiation treatments will impact the teeth and tissues in its path. The form of chemotherapy creates differing side effects with oral complications. Thus, the dental professional needs to discuss these issues with the oncology nurse or physician for guidance on how to tailor a treatment plan to best support the patient's needs and the timing for delivering this care.

The dental team's role is to support the patient and recognize that an overly prescriptive list of home care duties may not be practical at a time when all of the patient's energy is focused on fighting this horrible disease. The quality of a patient's life, and often life itself, can be compromised by oral mucositis. If mouth sores become ulcerated or infected, hospitalization may be required for parenteral nutrition and analgesics. Besides the potential threat of systemic bacterial infection, sores can interrupt the planned treatment schedule and result in patients missing or needing reduced doses that could undermine their chances for survival.¹

Listening to a patient's desires and communicating with caregivers about potential strategies they can implement to address oral health concerns and improve comfort while reducing risks for decay and mucositis requires the sharing of concise and straightforward information. An excellent site for reference is the National Cancer Institute's Oral Complications of Chemotherapy and Head/Neck Radiation (PDQ®) for Health Professionals.²

The support that oral health care providers deliver to cancer patients is medically necessary care. Sadly, addressing these dental care needs often comes with high out-of-pocket costs for the patient. Dental benefits, if available, are quickly exhausted due to frequency limitations and annual maximums. Submitting a claim to health plans is something many dental offices don't regularly do. When claims are filed, health plans often don't recognize these services for coverage, even when a patient's oncologist requests them.

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From the Editor (Continued from Page 18)

Cancer's financial burden is toxic, as more than 4 out of 10 patients deplete their entire life assets by two years following a cancer diagnosis.³ It is, therefore, important that the dental team communicate with the oncology office to help secure coverage for these necessary dental services. Supporting our patients on this journey includes providing narratives and advocating on their behalf with benefit and insurance carriers to help ease the personal financial burden from their battle with cancer.

Supporting our patients as they navigate their cancer journey comes in many forms. Dentistry is not taking a backseat, but its role is a small part of a more significant battle. Easing a patient's pain, reducing risk for disease, providing reassurance, and contributing to peace of mind are perhaps the greatest services we can provide to address a patient's needs. ●

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