AN EXPLORATION OF PATIENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF COLORECTAL CANCER AND ITS MANAGEMENT: A QUALITATIVE STUDY AT INITIATION OF TREATMENT WITH CHEMOTHERAPY

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BACKGROUND

• Chemotherapy remains the backbone of treatment for colorectal cancer.
• Due to its mode of action, it may lead to adverse effects that can affect patients physically and psychosocially.
• There is a paucity of studies that portray the patients’ perceptions at initiation of treatment.¹

AIM

To explore the patients’ perceptions of colorectal cancer and chemotherapy at initiation of treatment

METHOD

• An interview guide was compiled, reviewed by an expert panel and pilot-tested
• In-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with 16 patients who were administered their first cycle of FOLFOX/XELOX
• Setting: 113-bed national oncology hospital in Malta
• Data collection period: October 2018 to September 2019
• Interviews were conducted in the native language (Maltese) audio recorded and transcribed verbatim in denaturalised approach, with 10% random sample of transcripts undergoing accuracy check
• Data was independently analysed by 2 researchers whose native language is Maltese using an interpretative phenomenological approach
• Key themes were identified and illustrated using representative quotes

RESULTS

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Demographics</th>
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<td>Females 10/16</td>
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<td>Mean age of 62 years</td>
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<td>Treatment with FOLFOX 15/16</td>
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<td>Treatment with curative intent 9/16</td>
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That was a shock, as we only came to hospital emergency for further tests and X-rays. My family doctor assured me that it is highly suggestive of trapped wind.

[65 year old male receiving FOLFOX]

I thought about my hair... I was really worried that I’ll experience hair loss and become bald.

[67 year old female receiving FOLFOX]

I was afraid at the start of treatment as my friend who received chemotherapy complained of lethargy and feeling unwell. I am unaware of her cancer type but recall her situation well...

[69 year old male receiving FOLFOX]

That was a shock, as we only came to hospital emergency for further tests and X-rays. My family doctor assured me that it is highly suggestive of trapped wind.

[65 year old male receiving FOLFOX]

Knowledge about illness and treatment

Perceptions about illness and treatment

Influences on attitudes and knowledge about illness and treatment

Themes

• Feeling of ‘shock’ on receiving diagnosis of cancer, being worse amongst those patients who were initially misdiagnosed for benign gastrointestinal disease.
• Disbelief that colorectal cancer presented with vague symptoms such as altered bowel habit and abdominal pain.
• Feeling of ‘devastation’ on the recommendation to receive chemotherapy.
• Lack of knowledge about treatment-specific adverse effects evident through the patients’ expectations to experience severe alopecia and debilitating fatigue with their proposed treatment.
• Patient’s perceptions influenced by the patient’s concomitant treatment, chronic conditions and past experiences of family members or friends.
• General nurse-led group information sessions provided to all patients; these were found to influence patient attitudes and knowledge.

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

• Provide awareness of the patients’ perceptions towards colorectal cancer and its management with chemotherapy
• Assist healthcare professionals to address misconceptions and irrational fear
• Ensure individual counselling using patient-tailored treatment-specific information prior initiation of treatment

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