Development of a National Guideline for Refractory Breathlessness in Cancer Patients


¹University Hospital Munich, Department for Palliative Medicine, Munich, Germany; ²University Hospital of Cologne, Department of Palliative Medicine, Clinical Trials Unit (BMBF-01KN1106), and Centre for Integrated Oncology (CIO) Cologne/Bonn, Cologne, Germany; ³Hospital Grosshansdorf, Lung clinic, Grosshansdorf, Germany; ⁴Hospital Havelhoehe, Department of Palliative Medicine, Havelhoehe, Germany; ⁵Klinikum Essen-Mitte, Center for Palliative Medicine, Essen, Germany; ⁶Marienhospital Aachen, Diagnostik- und Therapiezentrum, Aachen, Germany; ⁷RWTH Aachen University, Department of Palliative Medicine, Aachen, Germany; ⁸KU Leuven, Research Group Health Psychology, Leuven, Belgium; ⁹University of Mainz, Department of Dermatology, Mainz, Germany; ¹⁰HELIOS Klinikum Emil von Behring, Department of Pneumology, Heckeshorn, Germany; ¹¹University Hospital of Würzburg, Interdisciplinary Center for Palliative Medicine, Würzburg, Germany; ¹²Fachkrankenhaus Coswig GmbH, Centre for Pulmonary Diseases and Thoracic Surgery, Coswig, Germany; ¹³University of Heidelberg, Thoraxklinik, Heidelberg, Germany; ¹⁴University of Lübeck, Department of Otorhinolaryngology, Head and Neck Surgery and Plastic Surgery, Lübeck, Germany; ¹⁵Pulmonary Research Institute at Lung Clinic Grosshansdorf, Germany

Background

To improve the management of refractory breathlessness in patients with advanced malignant disease, the German Association for Palliative Medicine initiated the development of an evidence based palliative care guideline for cancer patients including a guideline on breathlessness.

Aim

To develop an evidence and consensus based guideline for the management of refractory breathlessness for patients with advanced malignant disease.

Methods

Experts from various clinical (medical, nursing and physiotherapy) and research backgrounds developed key questions in an initial consensus process. Current evidence from existing guidelines and systematic reviews (including updates) was collected and new systematic reviews on the role of steroids and sedative drugs were conducted. Based on this evidence and clinical experience, recommendations were developed and formulated dependent on level of evidence (according to SIGN) or expert consensus with the following graduation: 1) highly recommended; 2) recommended; 3) optional. The recommendations were then reviewed and adapted in an online Delphi consensus process until agreement of at least 75% was reached.

Results

The guideline covers 20 recommendations on assessment and therapy of the underlying mechanisms (n=5), pharmacological therapy (n=9), non-pharmacological measures (n=4) and care in the dying phase (n=2). This guideline was finalized in a national consensus conference in November 2013 and will be published later in 2014 as part of the complete German Guideline for Palliative Care for Cancer Patients.

Example for an evidence based recommendation

Oral or parenteral opioids shall be utilised for symptomatic alleviation of dyspnoea among patients with cancer and dyspnoea. Grade of recommendation A; Level of evidence 1+

Conclusion

This evidence and consensus based guideline will hopefully improve the care of breathless cancer patients in Germany. An international adaptation of the guideline is planned.

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