Early Exposure to a Clinical Oncology Course During the Preclinical Second Year of Medical School

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Cancer Care in Crisis

1) Shortage of Oncologists:

*Israel:*
- 2010 – 25,000 newly diagnosed cancer patients for every 180 oncologists.

*United States:*
- 2014 – ASCO report: demand for oncologists will double but number of oncologists will increase by 28%.
- 450,000 new cancer patients will not be able to find care.

**Bottom Line:** High rates of burnout and turnover due to overwork. Need for more oncologists.
2) Cancer as a Chronic Disease:

- Growing aging population
- Modern treatments
- Increased survival and “living with cancer” as a chronic illness

**Bottom Line:** All healthcare professionals need to know about cancer and its treatment.
3) Empathic Doctors and Holistic Medicine:

BGU medical school:

- Values training knowledgeable and empathic doctors;
- communicate effectively and compassionately;
- understand the complex intersection between mind, body and psyche.
Early Exposure to a Clinical Oncology Course During the Preclinical Second Year of Medical School

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Abstract

Problem
Although only some medical students pursue a career in oncology, all should have a basic understanding of the issues surrounding cancer and its treatment. The authors designed and implemented a one-week introductory clinical oncology course for second-year medical students at Ben Gurion University of the Negev. The course presents a holistic approach to caring for patients with cancer that goes beyond the biological aspects of the disease.

Approach
In 2013, the authors interviewed four former students and surveyed all current students before and after they completed the course to evaluate its reception and effectiveness.

Outcomes
Of the 86 students in the course, 77 (90%) completed both the pre- and postcourse surveys. After taking the course, more students reported being concerned about ethical issues, being emotionally stirred by the course, being comfortable speaking with a cancer patient about death and dying, and being comfortable with the fact that the course dealt with issues of death and loss and with “how to live with cancer.” In addition, more students reported a fear of causing a cancer patient suffering because of a treatment yet viewed cancer optimistically. Finally, more students considered specializing in oncology.

Next Steps
That students reported increased empathy toward cancer patients despite increased trepidation about causing them suffering is promising. Such courses may be one way to counteract the decrease in empathy among students as they progress through medical school. As such, medical schools might consider including this type of curriculum in their preclinical oncology studies.

Problem
Over the last three decades, the medical school at Ben Gurion University of the Negev has developed a program that integrates clinical studies into the preclinical years (the first two years of a six-year medical program). Concordant issues associated with treating cancer patients and prepares them early in their education for dealing with these issues.

During the course, students interview cancer patients; attend lectures by various health care professionals who treat cancer patients; discuss the ethical implications of the disease and its treatment; and present their findings before and after they completed the course. We hypothesized that early exposure to the psychological and ethical issues surrounding cancer and its treatment would complement students’ understanding of cancer patients and their families.
Research Team

- Leeat Granek, PhD – Department of Public Health
- Irena Lazarev, MD – Soroka, Oncology Department
- Shira Birenstock-Cohen, MSW – Soroka, Oncology Department
- David Geffen, MD – Soroka, Oncology Department
- Klaris Risenberg, MD – Soroka, Infectious Diseases
- Samual Ariad, MD – Soroka, Head of Oncology Department
Preclinical Oncology Course

- 1 week course during 2nd year of medical school;
- Course running for 30 years;
- Focus on the ethical and emotional issues in the practice of oncology;
- Students: interview patients, attend lectures by hcps who treat cancer, have group discussions, read JCO articles, visit facilities where cancer patients receive treatment and support, and watch relevant films.
Methods

- Qualitative interviews with former students of the course to develop survey.

- Development of face-valid survey.

- 77/86 students filled out the surveys pre and post the course.
Survey Questions

- a) experiences with cancer;
- b) emotional views of cancer (e.g., fear of cancer, comfort with death and dying);
- c) capacity building towards cancer patients;
- d) views of oncology;
- e) views of practicing oncology.

- Multiple choice design or rating scale 1-5
- Demographic variables
- Pre/Post analysis
Results

- **Post Taking the Course:**
  - Increase in concerns about ethical issues;
  - More emotionally stirred by course issues;
  - More comfortable speaking with a cancer patient about death and dying;
  - More comfortable with death and loss;
  - More comfortable with issues around “how to live with cancer”;
  - More worried about causing a cancer patient suffering;
  - More optimistic about being able to treat cancer;
  - More believe oncologists need to treat BOTH biological and emotional aspects of cancer;
  - **More students considered specializing in oncology.**
Open-Ended Questions

- “How do you think this course will affect you as a doctor?”
- “What in your view has changed in your understanding of cancer as a result of the course?”
  - “Now I know what cancer patients feel like when they go through treatment.”
  - “I learned that it’s essential to pay attention to the emotional aspects of patients when practicing medicine.”
  - “In addition to learning about the specialty of cancer, I hope that as a doctor I won’t forget my humanity of the humanity of my patients.”
Summary

- The training is effective in:
  - 1. Increasing likelihood of these students choosing oncology as their specialty in the future.
  - 2. Increasing empathy towards cancer patients and their families.
  - 3. Increasing effective communication skills about difficult issues such as death and dying.
Implications and Outcomes

- Well trained, empathic doctors;
- More ethical doctors;
- Doctors that can communicate effectively and compassionately with patients;
- Decreasing the oncology crisis by priming medical students to choose oncology.

- Preclinical medical education in oncology is an effective strategy and should be incorporated into all medical school curriculum.
Cancer care in the United States and around the globe is in crisis. In 2014, the American Society for Clinical Oncology reported that while the demand for cancer care services has doubled, the number of practicing oncologists is likely to increase by
The one-week course for second-year medical students presents a holistic approach to caring for patients with cancer that goes beyond the biological aspects of the disease.
Psychologist: All Medical Students Should Have A Basic Understanding Of Issues Surrounding Cancer And Its Treatment.

In a piece in the Huffington Post (10/31, Granek Ph.d., 11.54M) "The Blog" titled "The Oncology Crisis," Leaet Granek, Ph.D., a "critical health psychologist who studies grief, loss and cancer patients and their families," writes that while "only a sub-set of the population of medical students will choose cancer as their specialty, it's essential that all medical students have a basic understanding of the biological, social, and psychological issues surrounding cancer and its treatment." Granek argues, "Preclinical oncology education is one promising way to make sure that all physicians develop these skills." Granek also points out that ASCO has "reported that while the demand for cancer care services has doubled, the number of practicing oncologists is likely to increase by only 28 percent in the next decade."

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With the world facing a shortage of oncologists, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev (BGU) researchers have determined that preclinical study of oncology may increase the number of students entering the field and may make them more empathetic and concerned about ethical issues of treatment.

The study was published in the journal, Academic Medicine, and led by Dr. Leaet Granek, an assistant professor and health psychologist in BGU’s Department of Public Health and Prof. Samuel Ariad, head of the Oncology Department at Soroka University Medical Center and BGU’s Oncology Institute.

In 2014, the American Society for Clinical Oncology reported that while the demand for cancer care services has doubled, the number of practicing oncologists is likely to increase by only 28 percent in the next decade. The report concludes that nearly 450,000 new cancer patients in the United States are going to face serious obstacles in getting the lifesaving care they need. Modern treatments are able to prolong survival for many patients, making cancer a chronic illness that will need to be managed by all health care professionals, not just oncologist professionals.

The authors designed and implemented a one-week introductory preclinical oncology course for oncology medical students at BGU. In 2013, 27 students completed the course. In 2014, the course was expanded to include 20 additional students. Both years, students indicated they would be more likely to choose oncology as a specialty and showed increased interest in the field.

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