

Palliative care in elderly cancer patients with focus on India

Dr. Srinivas Bhaskar Thakur

Junior Resident, Department of Geriatric Medicine, All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), Delhi

The biological reality of ageing has its own dynamics, which till today are beyond human control. In developing countries where social welfare system is weak, old age begins when active contribution to family and community is no longer possible or when individual becomes dysfunctional and disabled. Cancer is a disease associated with ageing. There is 11-fold increase in cancer incidence and 16-fold increase in cancer mortality in people over 65 years age. India is rapidly moving towards an ageing society and projected 2021 Indian population in age above 60 would increase by 102% when compared to 2001. It is predicted that while there will be 80% rise in people above 60 years; incidence of cancer will increase by 100% in 2026 compared to 2006. In addition to increased rate in elderly, cancer causes increased morbidity and mortality. Around 2.5 million Indians suffer from cancer. Every year almost 2 lac new cancer cases are diagnosed and 70% are in advanced stage. Majority of elderly diagnosed with cancer are in advanced stage where no curative intervention can be done. Palliative care enables transition from curative treatment to end-of-life care. PubMed search with term “Palliative care” produces 46,060 hits; articles mostly related to cancer patients. Dichotomy between cure on one hand and palliation on other reflects oncologic roots of palliative medicine. Although concept of palliative care is not new, most physicians concentrate on trying to cure. Palliative care is not in contradiction to curative care, rather it entails directed care. Just as it is incorrect to perceive death as failure of medicine, it is wrong to look at palliative care as last option before death. Despite its limited coverage, palliative care is present in India for about 20 years. Obstacles in growth of palliative care in India are too many. Nonetheless we have reasons to be proud to have overcome several hurdles and seen palpable changes in mind-set of health care providers and policy makers with respect to its need. Systematic continuing medical education with increased courses and faculties in palliative medicine along with government palliative care policy and public health education will further strengthen the roots of palliative care in India.