Patient concerns and disruptions in cancer care during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Introduction: The COVID-19 pandemic has uniquely impacted the lives of people with cancer, but the specifics of these impacts are not fully understood. We examined: 1) the impact of COVID-19 on cancer-related health care, and 2) patients’ most prominent COVID-related concerns.

Method: From Sept-Dec 2020, 502 cancer patients completed an online survey about disruptions in cancer-related health care (types and causes of disruptions and length of health care delays). COVID-related concerns (e.g., accessing basic and medical needs, financial concerns, psychosocial impact) were assessed via 25 items rated not at all to extremely concerning, or not applicable. Group differences were examined with Pearson Chi-Square.

Sample: 75% women, 82% White, age range 20-88 years (M= 60, SD=12.1); 61% in remission, 16% experiencing cancer relapse, 13% experiencing cancer for the first time; current stage: 40% metastatic, 25% localized, 35% no stage/don’t know; time since diagnosis range 0-36 years (M=8.8, SD=7.0); primary cancer diagnoses: 29% breast, 27% blood cancers, 6% prostate, 5% lung, 5% colorectal, and 28% other; 47% currently in treatment. 49% were tested for COVID-19, 3% tested positive.

Results: 40% (n=200) reported a disruption in cancer-related health care: of these, 34% reported disruption in imaging services, 30% lab service, 26% routine screening, 25% supportive services, 12% treatment session (including 46% chemotherapy, 13% radiation, 13% hormone therapy, 4% surgery), and 14% other disruption, with 10% reporting delay in cancer diagnosis. Nearly half with care delays reported a delay of 2-3 months (18%) or 3+ months (30%), with 3+ months delays occurring most often for routine screenings (40%) and supportive services (37%). Primary causes for disruptions included clinicians recommending the delay (46%) and patient fear of contracting COVID-19 via in person care (31%). The top 3 areas of COVID-19-related concerns (somewhat to extremely concerned) were: 1) others not following safety recommendations e.g., wearing masks (85%), 2) getting COVID-19 due to a weakened immune system (76%), and 3) worrying about loved ones’ health (73%). Those in remission less frequently experienced delay in care (35%) than those with first time cancer (50%) or relapse (51%, $\chi^2=10.5$, p<.05), and those in current treatment more frequently experienced delay in care (44%) than those not in treatment (36%, $\chi^2=3.5$, p<.10).

Conclusion: Findings highlight the substantial impact of COVID-19 on cancer care, across various forms of care needs and health services. Patients experiencing cancer for the first time, a cancer relapse, or those undergoing treatment reported high levels of delays, with many delays in excess of 3 months. Given the unique impact of COVID-19 to cancer patients, these results highlight opportunities for care service delivery improvements as the health care community navigates competing priorities of patient safety and care quality.