Exploring the Impact of Immunotherapy on Cancer Patients’ Quality of Life

Background
Immunotherapy (IO) has demonstrated superior clinical benefits compared to previous anticancer treatments in multiple tumors. A better understanding of the patients’ IO patient experience in the real world will allow health care professionals to develop effective and supportive resources, help improve clinical practice, and assist patients in managing the cancer experience.

Study Aims
To describe IO cancer patient experiences, including the physical, functional, and emotional dimensions, patient-provider communication and treatment decision-making, financial burden, and unmet cancer care needs.

Methods
This cross-sectional qualitative study consisted of cancer patients who reported receiving IO targeting PD1/L-1. This study included three independent focus groups (4-8 members in each group): participants were assigned to a group based on how long they have been receiving treatment prior to enrolling in the study: Focus Group 1 (0-6 months), Focus Group 2 (6-12 months), and Focus Group 3 (12+ months). Thematic analyses followed a deductive approach. Codes and themes were generated based on the European Organization for Research and Treatment of Cancer Quality of Life Questionnaire (EORTC QLQ-C30). This study received IRB approval from Ethical & Independent Review Services.

Inclusion Criteria: (1) men or women 18 years or older; (2) have a cancer diagnosis; (3) currently receiving IO targeting PD1/L-1 receptors; and (4) willing and able to sign informed consent and participate in the focus group. Respondents were categorized into three groups: receiving IO for 0-12 months, 12-24 months, and 24+ months.

Participants
Table 1. Focus group participant sample characteristics

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Results
- Participants in all groups reported fatigue as the most common side effect, stated they had less ability to do daily tasks due to fatigue, found that other patients with the same diagnosis provided the greatest emotional support, and had concerns regarding finances/careers. Most participants in all groups also reported they had adjusted to their new normal and were satisfied with the coordination between members of their healthcare team and communication with their oncologist.

Differences between Groups
- Participants in Group 1 were more concerned with recurrence and trying to figure out their new roles at home and at work.
- Participants in Focus Groups 2 and 3 were mostly unable to work due to diagnosis/treatment and reported this was a difficult adjustment that affected their identity.
- Focus Group 3 participants were particularly concerned about non-medical expenses and reported receiving insufficient information about IO.

Implications
A better understanding of the IO cancer patient experience at different time points in treatment will allow:
- Healthcare providers to address unmet needs from the IO patient perspective
- Increase healthcare professionals’ awareness of IO patients’ challenges and support good communication practices.

This will aid health care professionals working towards the goal of improving patient well-being, ultimately contributing to treatment adherence in this population.