Importance of Early Palliative or Supportive Care in Gynecologic Cancers

Highlights with Dr. Susan Hong and Dr. Payam Kashi

1) Palliative care is NOT end-of-life care

- Palliative or supportive care is designed to support patients and their families throughout the entire cancer continuum, beginning as early as diagnosis.
- It works alongside surgery, chemotherapy, maintenance therapy, immunotherapy and clinical trials rather than replacing active cancer treatment.
- The goal is to help patients not only live longer, but live better while undergoing treatment.

2) Earlier supportive care can improve the treatment experience

- Many symptoms and treatment-related side effects can be anticipated before they become debilitating.
- Supportive care teams can help proactively address pain, nausea, neuropathy, fatigue, nutrition, bowel issues and other symptoms.
- Earlier intervention can help patients feel better prepared, know what to expect and understand where to turn when symptoms arise.

3) Quality of life should be part of every treatment decision

- Treatment decisions should consider more than controlling the cancer; they should also reflect what matters most to the individual patient.
- Supportive care can help patients weigh potential benefits, toxicities and lifestyle impact when considering therapies or clinical trials.
- Maintaining independence, relationships, physical activity, intimacy and meaningful life experiences are important measures of successful cancer care.

4) Support extends beyond physical symptoms

- Palliative care can address emotional distress, fear of recurrence, anxiety, spiritual concerns and the uncertainty that often accompanies cancer.
- Scan anxiety and fear of recurrence are common, and recognizing triggers and developing coping strategies can help patients manage them.
- Peer support and credible cancer support organizations can provide education, reassurance, resilience and hope.

5) Caregivers need support too

- Cancer affects not only the individual diagnosed but also spouses, partners, family members and other caregivers.
- Caregiver stress and exhaustion are increasingly recognized as important components of comprehensive cancer care.
- Supportive care teams can help families understand options, navigate difficult conversations and feel more prepared to support their loved one.

6) Survivorship and supportive care should work together

- Support should not end when treatment ends.
- An ideal model would integrate palliative or supportive care in parallel with oncology care from diagnosis through long-term survivorship.
- Even patients many years beyond diagnosis can benefit from access to clinicians who understand their cancer history and its long-term physical and emotional effects.

7) Nutrition matters during cancer treatment

- Cancer and treatment can significantly affect body composition, including loss of lean muscle mass.
- Adequate protein intake can be particularly important for maintaining strength and energy during treatment.
- Patients should discuss individual nutritional needs with their care team and, when available, an oncology dietitian.

Key takeaways: Supportive Care from the Start

- Ask about palliative or supportive care early - you do not need to wait until cancer is advanced or treatment options are limited.
- Think beyond cancer control: symptom management, emotional well-being, nutrition, family support and quality of life are all part of comprehensive cancer care.
- Patients should feel empowered to ask for supportive services even when their oncology team does not raise the subject first.
- Seek information from credible, evidence-based sources and make treatment decisions in partnership with a care team that listens to your priorities.
- Above all, cancer care should help every Ovarcomer feel heard, informed and supported throughout the journey.

"Make sure that wherever you're getting your cancer care, you feel completely heard and supported." — Dr. Susan Hong

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