

Psychiatric Case

Use scenario 1 or 2 to address the questions below.

Scenario 1

A 65-year-old man with extensive stage small cell lung cancer is seen in clinic. His disease progressed on second-line chemotherapy. His ECOG is 3. On review of his symptoms, he admits to sleeping poorly. He complains of anorexia. The smell of food makes him nauseated at times. He has lost 4 kgs in the last five weeks. He spends most of his time sleeping or watching television. He admits to feeling “down” and frustrated with his situation. His wife informs you that she finds him much more irritable. He doesn't want any visitors including family. Family history reveals that his mother had suffered from depression.

Scenario 2

A 44-year-old woman who has just completed carboplatin and paclitaxel chemotherapy for treatment of her stage 3 ovarian cancer complains of feeling quite anxious now that the chemotherapy is completed. She didn't sleep well during her chemotherapy but that was thought to be secondary to the dexamethasone. She admits to feeling teary and weepy at times over the last three to four weeks. She has very supportive family and friends, but admits to not getting enjoyment from their company, and finds social interactions quite taxing. She has been spending most of her days in bed. Her husband is doing most of the household tasks. She has to ‘force’ herself to eat, but has maintained her weight. Although there is no family history of any psychiatric illness, she did suffer ‘postpartum blues’ after the birth of her first child 10 years ago.

1. What proportion of patients with cancer will be diagnosed with a psychiatric illness?
2. How would you determine whether the patients in the cases presented above are experiencing ‘normal’ symptoms for the stage of their disease/treatment, or whether they are suffering from a psychiatric illness?
3. What resources exist at your centre and in your community for patients with mental illness?
4. What is your approach to diagnosing depression amidst the somatic symptoms that cancer itself causes?
5. What pharmacologic treatments for depression and anxiety may be best suited for patients with advanced cancer?

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