

PALLIATIVE CARE TIPS – Revised and Re-issued by Dr. Yoko Tarumi, Editor. Regional Palliative Care Program, Edmonton, AB. Issue #1 (March 2005)

Delirium: Common complication near the end of life, occurring in:

- 15-25% of hospitalized cancer patients
- Up to 88 % of terminally ill cancer patients (frequency increases as death approaches)

Importance of recognizing delirium because of:

- Effect on patients and caregivers (participation in decision-making, family is often distressed more than the patient)
- Interference with the recognition and control of physical and psychological symptoms
- Often under-diagnosed

Challenges in diagnosing delirium are:

- Variability and fluctuation in clinical presentation
- Confusion with other common psychiatric symptoms, such as depression, dementia and psychosis

Clinical presentations of delirium are:

- Hyperactive form
- Hypoactive form
- Mixed hyper/hypoactive form

What to look for (causes): Multiple etiologies are common and 50% of patients have no clear etiology

- Factors: Drugs (opioids, anticholinergics, anticonvulsants, corticosteroids, benzodiazepines, etc.); Sepsis; Dehydration; Metabolic/organ failure; Hypoxemia; CNS metastasis; Substance withdrawal. Constipation and urinary retention may aggravate the agitation associated with delirium.

Screening for delirium:

- Folstein's MMSE: screening tool for cognitive impairment only
- Signs: hallucination, paranoia, behavioral changes such as agitation
- Myoclonus may suggest underlying opioid neurotoxicity

Management of delirium:

- Address underlying causes
- Opioid rotation
- Minimize drugs
- Hydration
- Correct hypercalcemia or hyponatremia if possible
- Oxygen if hypoxic
- Treat sepsis if appropriate

Pharmacological approach for delirium:

- Older antipsychotics
 - Haloperidol 0.5-2 mg po/sc q12h to q8h
 - Methotrimeprazine 6.25-25 mg po/sc q12h to q8h
 - Loxapine 2.5-10 mg po/sc q12h to q8h
- Newer antipsychotics
 - Olanzapine 2.5-10 mg po/sl qd to bid
 - Risperidone 0.5-2 mg po/sl qd to bid

Outcome of delirium:

- 40-60% of cases are reversible
- Reversible etiologies are often opioids, psychoactive medications and dehydration
- Less reversible at the end of life
- Challenge is to know when it can be reversed and when it is part of the natural process of dying: important to address the goals of care when approaching delirium

REMEMBER: For referrals, questions, or telephone consultations call 496-1300 weekdays and weekends.

Palliative Care Tips are now available on our Website: www.palliative.org