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comment | reviews

How digital tools could improve cancer care

Specialist nurses could glean information collected from patients at home to proactively improve care and lengthen lives



References

American Society of Clinical Oncology (2017) Discussing PROMS and breast cancer outcomes. www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lq-vjtbaDey

Basch E, Deal AM, Ducek AC et al (2017) Overall survival results of a trial assessing patient-reported outcomes for symptom monitoring during routine cancer treatment. jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/2630810

Cancer Innovation Challenge (2018) New Approaches to Record and Integrate Cancer PROMS and PREMS Phase 2 Projects. tinyurl.com/cancer-challenge-Scotland

A recent study in the US showed that collecting patient-reported outcome measures (PROMs) – clinical surveys that track how much a condition is affecting a patient's life – throughout chemotherapy could improve survival as well as quality of life for people with advanced cancer.

The benefit was an average of five months of extra life (Basch et al 2017), which is a better result than that seen with the majority of recently licensed chemotherapy drugs (American Society of Clinical Oncology 2017).

Small interventions

The reasons for this aren't magic. It's simply that specialist nurses could use information collected from patients at home to take action to proactively improve their care. Therefore, a patient reporting pain or nausea could be assessed remotely between hospital visits and treated to help them feel better, and signs of illness could be spotted early so unplanned hospital admissions could be avoided.

These seemingly small interventions added up to make sure more patients received further chemotherapy and meant that more lived significantly longer as a result, the study found.

As you would expect, PROMs – and the documented positive results they yield – have caused a stir in cancer services here in the UK, too.

Our system, My Clinical Outcomes (MCO), is a website for collecting and analysing PROMs that we originally developed for hip and knee replacement patients in 2011. It has evolved over the years and now is used in more than 60 hospitals for various medical and surgical conditions.

Following on from the US research, MCO won Cancer Innovation Challenge funding from NHS Scotland to develop the system for cancer patients in Scotland.

'The system has been well received by patients, who tell us they feel more closely looked after between appointments'

The project has had a high profile, with the chief medical officer in Scotland getting behind it. The system is now in use at NHS Ayrshire and Arran for patients with blood cancers. The Beatson West of Scotland Cancer Centre plans to use MCO soon.

The system has been well received by patients, who tell us they feel more closely looked after between appointments. Patients and healthcare professionals find it saves time by shortening or even replacing reviews previously done face-to-face or over the phone.

Healthcare professionals say that the data allows the right clinical decisions to be made at the appropriate time. Comparisons can be more easily made between patients ensure everyone is looked after as well as possible.

Piloted

MCO is also being piloted for pelvic radiotherapy patients in collaboration with Macmillan Cancer Support and the Royal College of Radiologists at three cancer centres in England and Wales, with patients who report symptoms of late-toxicity being directed back in to the cancer service.

As Macmillan Cancer Support chief medical officer Jane Maher puts it: 'Routine collection of patient-reported outcomes improves survival of patients with advanced cancer – so let's get on with it.'

We agree. It's time we embraced the potential of simple and cost-effective digital tools to help improve the care of people with cancer everywhere.



For more go to myclinicaloutcomes.com