Palliative chemotherapy during last month of life

A retrospective study of medical records in Northern Sweden
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Background
Use of palliative chemotherapy treatment (CT) in incurable cancer has increased due to more available drugs and wider indications. Prolongation of life is successful in many cases. When to cease further CT is a difficult decision. To benefit from the very last CT a reasonable survival-time between last treatment and death ought to be at least one month.

Aim
The aim of this study was to identify the proportion of patients in 2008 who were being treated with palliative CT during their last month of life.

Method
Medical records of patients treated with palliative CT (N=374) in 2007 or 2008 and who died in 2008 were identified. They had been treated iv. for epithelial cancer and were between 20-100 years old.

Patients were divided in two groups; CLM (CT Last Month of life) n=87, and NCLM (No CT Last Month of life) n=287. The groups were compared statistically in PASW to identify potentially discriminative factors.

Conclusions
- A substantial proportion (23%) get their last chemotherapy treatment (CT) during the last month of life
- No predictive characteristics for this group has been identified
- Chemotherapy treatment in the last month of life may cause more negative than positive effects

Results
Of 374 included patients 87 (23%) belonged to the CLM-group.

The CLM-group vs. NCLM:
- was admitted to hospital more often within 30 days because of CT (52% vs. 29%)
- lacked a documented cessation decision more often (79% vs. 30%)
- had a shorter survival from CT start to death (median-time 111 days vs. 288 days)
- died less often at home (24% vs. 38%)

There were no differences between the groups in gender, age, diagnosis, and number of treatments.

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