

Influence of Covid-19 Pandemic on Safe and Timely Delivery of Systemic Anti-Cancer Therapy, Dubai Hospital Experience

Muhammad Farooq Latif^{a++}, Syed Hammad Tirmazi^{a++} and Dalia Mahmoud El-Shourbagy^{a#}

^a *Dubai Hospital, Al Khaleej Street, Dubai, UAE.*

Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

Aims: To analyze the effect of COVID-19 pandemic on timely delivery of systemic anti-cancer treatment including chemotherapy, biological therapy and immunotherapy and assess complication rate.

Place and Duration of Study: Department of Oncology, Dubai Hospital, Dubai, UAE from January 2020 to July 2020.

Methods: This is a retrospective review of electronic medical records and infusion Centre log of the number of chemotherapy sessions administered in the infusion therapy Centre, Dubai hospital from January 2020 to July 2020. Data on treatment delays, interruptions or discontinuations, and adverse events such as febrile neutropenia were collected and analysed.

Results: A total of 1553 systemic treatment sessions were recorded between January 2020 to July 2020 with an average of 222 treatment sessions per month. Physician recorded delays were observed in ninety (5.79%) treatment sessions. The average treatment delay was 7 (2-13) days. Delays were frequently caused by the overall treatment course and disease-related factors (toxicities, disease progression). The highest number of treatment delays (n=23,10.2%) were recorded in April, at the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic, most likely because of the implementation of extreme precautionary measures. There were no interruptions or discontinuations in treatment.

⁺⁺ *Consultant Medical Oncologist;*

[#] *Senior Specialist Registrar Oncology;*

^{*}*Corresponding author: Email: drfarooqlatif@hotmail.com;*

Fourteen (<1%) patients developed febrile neutropenia. With treatment, all of them recovered fully. No significant change in systemic treatment related complications were observed during the pandemic.

Conclusion: This study found no evidence of an appreciable rise in the number of complications or delays in systemic anticancer treatment during the COVID-19 pandemic. This experience indicates that systemic chemotherapy may be delivered successfully during a pandemic with infection control and safety precautions. However, more research with a larger sample size is needed for more accurate advice in this case.

Keywords: COVID-19 infection; pandemic; systemic anticancer therapy; neutropenia.

1. INTRODUCTION

In March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak as global pandemic. Since then, over 600 million people have been infected with over 6 million confirmed deaths globally [1]. Governments were advised by WHO to introduce public health measures including social distancing, use of face masks, isolation and quarantine to reduce the risk of viral transmission. This resulted in disruption of diagnostics and treatment services due to reallocation of resources to prioritize emergency care to combat the Covid-19 pandemic. Cancer services globally are resource dependent and require a multidisciplinary team approach. Due to limited access to routine medical services, concerns were raised about continuation and safe delivery of systemic anti-cancer therapy (SACT). Oncology Physicians had to weigh the risks and benefits of administering SACT versus the risk of developing COVID 19 infection as cancer patients can be severely immunocompromised due to cancer and its treatment. Furthermore, many cancer patients are elderly and may require frequent visits to healthcare facilities for treatment increasing the risk of infection transmission [2]. Whether the cancer diagnosis or anti-cancer treatment leads to increased risk of complications in COVID-19 infection is unclear.

High rates of intensive care unit admission and deaths due to the COVID-19 infection in cancer patients have been reported in many studies [3]. Data from a retrospective study suggested higher risk of complications if cancer treatment administered within 2 weeks of developing COVID-19 infection [4]. However, data from the UK Coronavirus Cancer Monitoring Project (UKCCMP) did not report any evidence of a higher risk of mortality from the COVID-19 infection in cancer patients [5].

The United Arab Emirates reported the first case of COVID-19 in January 2020. Being a major international transit hub, the government of the UAE took strict measures to contain viral spread. Dubai Health Authority (DHA) is one of the leading governmental entities providing medical care in the Emirate of Dubai. The oncology department of the Dubai Hospital (DH) manages approximately 20% of the UAE cancer population and on average 3000 systemic treatments are administered annually. Owing to the requirements of COVID-19 pandemic to reduce social contact and implement social distancing, the oncology department in Dubai hospital carried out several practical measures to ensure a safe and effective delivery of service. This included implementation of telemedicine service, laboratory tests and subcutaneous treatments in the community to reduce hospital visits, oral chemotherapeutic agents where possible, colony stimulating factors to reduce immunosuppression following chemotherapy, early treatment dose modifications and less frequent use of dose dense schedules. In this article, the experience of the use of SACT during COVID-19 pandemic is described [6]. To the best of our knowledge, this may be the first report on this subject from the Arabian Gulf.

2. METHODS

In this retrospective study, the electronic medical records of patients with solid malignancies who received systemic anticancer therapy with either curative or palliative intent in Dubai Hospital during the first wave of COVID-19 pandemic from January 2020 to July 2020 were reviewed. Eligibility criteria included all adult patients who received one or more cycles of chemotherapy during the study period and had at least 6 weeks of follow up records available after the last session of chemotherapy. Patients with insufficient follow up documentations, incomplete toxicity assessment and previous history of COVID-19 infection as well as hematological malignancies were excluded from the

study. Treatment was funded through public or private health insurance in majority of the patients.

Patients were identified from the hospital cancer registry and chemotherapy infusion center log. Using electronic medical records and chemotherapy infusion center log, data regarding, patients' demographics, cancer type, anticancer therapy, intention of treatment, use of colony stimulating factors, laboratory reports and relevant clinical information was collected. Data regarding the number of chemotherapy sessions administered, treatment interruption or discontinuation and adverse events including febrile neutropenia was also collected.

Any interruption or prolongation of treatment cycle of more than one day due to any cause including patient's choice was recorded and considered treatment delay. Chemotherapy toxicity was assessed using Common Terminology Criteria for Adverse Events (CTCAE v4.03). Data was analyzed using Microsoft Excel version 1808.

3. RESULTS

A total of 1553 systemic treatment sessions were recorded in the oncology infusion therapy center, Dubai Hospital from January 2020 to July 2020 with an average of 222 treatment sessions per month.

Median age of the patients was 56 years and the majority of the patients were female (62 %).

Breast cancer was the most common diagnosis (40%) followed by Colon cancer (15%) and other malignancies (45%).

Sixty percent systemic anticancer treatment sessions were delivered in a curative setting and 40% with palliative intent.

Most commonly used antineoplastic agents were taxanes (docetaxel, paclitaxel) followed by

anthracyclines (epirubicin, doxorubicin), platinum (cisplatin, carboplatin), and antimetabolites (capecitabine, gemcitabine).

Majority of the treatments were delivered in the month of July 2020 (n=308, 20%). Ninety (5.79%) treatment sessions were delayed by the Oncology Physicians over the 7 months study period. Average duration of treatment delay was 7 (2-13) days.

Common reasons for treatment delays included toxicities (n=58) and disease progression (n=17). Fifteen patients requested treatment deferral due to concerns of viral transmission.

Highest number of treatment delays (n=23, 10.2%) were recorded in the month of April at the peak of COVID-19 pandemic likely representing implementation of extreme precautionary measures. There were no treatment interruptions or discontinuations (Table 1, Fig. 1).

Fourteen (<1%) patients developed febrile neutropenia including seven patients with grade 4 febrile neutropenia. All patients received intravenous antibiotics within 1 hour of presentation to the Emergency department. Median duration of hospitalization was seven (4-17) days. All patients fully recovered after treatment with no complications (Fig. 2).

No significant change in systemic treatment related complications during the pandemic were observed.

4. DISCUSSION

Healthcare facilities globally underwent major changes to ensure safe and effective service delivery during COVID-19 pandemic. This included partial or complete closure of diagnostic services, cancellation of elective surgical procedures to increase capacity and conserve resources to deal with the emergent situation due to pandemic [7].

Table 1. Details of treatment sessions, delays and incidence of febrile neutropenia

Month	No of SACT sessions	No. of SACT delays	Percentage of delays	No of patients with FN
January	215	08	3.70%	0
February	207	10	4.80%	0
March	220	16	7.20%	02
April	213	23	10.70%	04
May	183	07	3.80%	01
June	207	10	4.80%	02
July	308	16	5.19%	05

SACT= Systemic anticancer therapy; FN=Febrile neutropenia

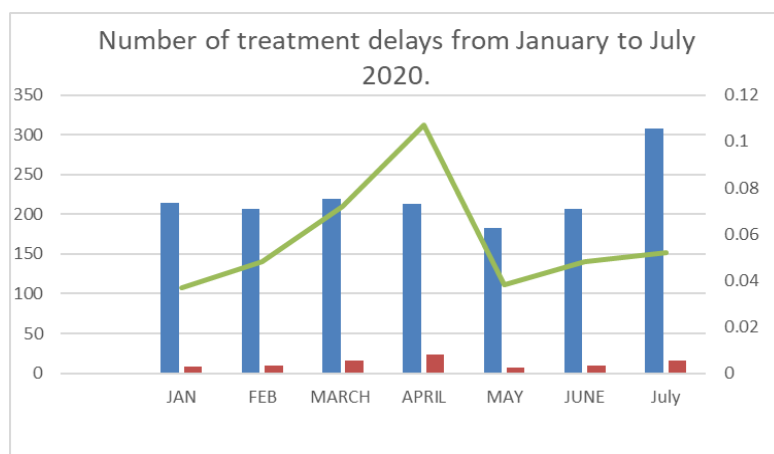


Fig. 1. Anticancer therapy delays from January 2020 to July 2020
■ Total number of treatment sessions ■ Number of delays

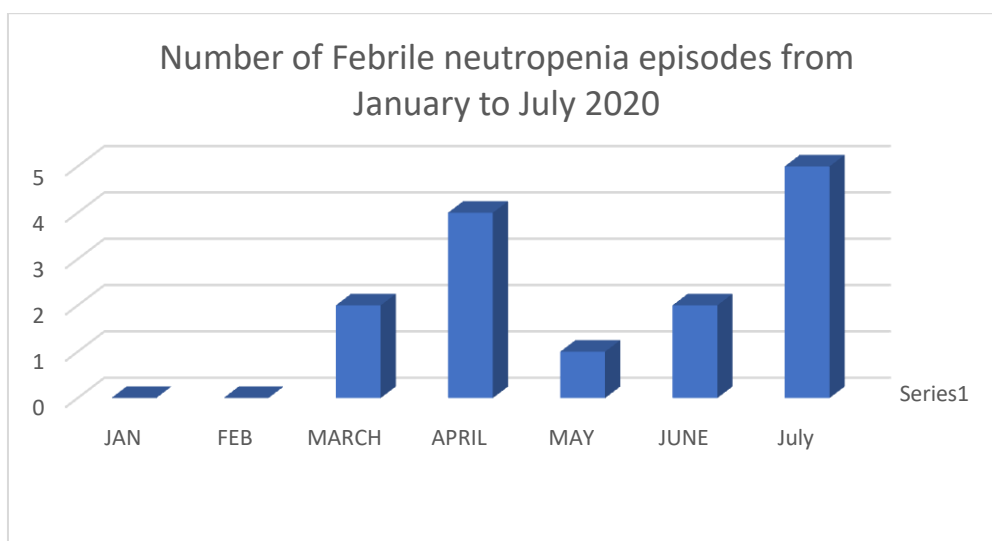


Fig. 2. Episodes of febrile neutropenia from January to July 2020

The American College of Surgeons and Center for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) recommended hospitals and surgeons to limit elective procedures to decrease viral exposure [8,9]. Cancer services were disrupted including reduction in any routine activity of cancer services, reduction in the number of cancer surgeries, delay in radiotherapy, and delay, reschedule, or cancellation of outpatient visits [10]. Studies have shown that the risk of complications from COVID-19 infection is not uniform across the population [11]. During pandemic, cancer patients receiving treatments were assumed to be at a higher risk of developing infection, however there is limited evidence to support this mainly in the form of retrospective case series involving a small

number of patients [12]. This hypothesis led to widespread changes to anticancer treatment prescriptions [13]. This retrospective study looked at the practice of anticancer treatment prescriptions, delays, treatment dose modifications and adverse events in a 7 month period during the first wave of the pandemic. In this report, the administration of cancer treatment was not delayed during Covid-19 pandemic and SACT did not appear to be detrimental.

Liang et al. suggested that surgery or adjuvant chemotherapy should be postponed for stable patients during pandemic due to high risk of developing COVID-19 infection within 4 weeks after treatment [3]. However Russel *et al.* concluded that SACT was able to be continued

without any significant effects on the mortality of solid-tumor patients [14]. Another study by Zhang *et al.* reported vulnerability of cancer patients during the pandemic and suggested that cancer patients should receive anticancer therapy timely in the setting of vigorous screening for COVID-19 and extraordinary precautionary measures. Median age of patients in this study was 65 years and the majority (25%) of the patients had Lung cancer [4].

In contrast, the study population reported in this study is younger and lung cancer is less frequent. Amongst the 1553 chemotherapy sessions, the vast majority of treatments (94.21%) were delivered on time during the 7 months of study period with strict adherence to COVID-19 precautionary measures. This is consistent with the standard practice during non-pandemic situations.

An Irish study by Fitzpatrick *et al.* looked at the chemotherapy dayward attendance over a 4 months period from January to April 2020 and reported no treatment delays during pandemic. It was concluded that safe and continued delivery of systemic anti-cancer therapy during the COVID-19 pandemic is possible [15]. These results are consistent with the results of the current study. Physicians documented treatment delay during ninety encounters (5.79%) with an average duration of delay of 7 days. Coinciding with the peak of the pandemic, 23 (10.2%) treatment sessions were delayed in the month of April 2020. This was probably due to extreme restrictive precautionary measures and physician's perception of the overall situation.

Treatment related toxicities and disease progression were the common causes of chemotherapy delays.

Neutropenia is one of the common side effects of myelosuppressive chemotherapy and a major cause of treatment delays, dose modification, increased cost, reduced quality of life and infection related morbidity and mortality [16-18]. Incidence of febrile neutropenia is 10-20 % in patients receiving chemotherapy for metastatic solid cancers and prophylactic use of granulocyte colony stimulating factors (G-CSF) can reduce the severity and duration of febrile neutropenia [19,20]. Toriumi R et al reported a significant reduction of febrile neutropenia rate in patients receiving inpatient chemotherapy for urological cancers during pandemic [21]. This was suggested to be secondary to implementation of

hygienic measures for healthcare professionals and patients. In this study, the rate of febrile neutropenia was exceptionally low (n=14, <1%) as compared to pre pandemic data. This could be due to strict COVID-19 precautionary measures, adherence to infection prevention protocols and liberal use of G-CSF.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is safe to continue cancer treatment in a timely manner with low risk of febrile neutropenia during a pandemic with strict hygienic measures, adherence to infection prevention protocols, frequent use of growth factors and patient education. The results of this study may help alleviate some concerns and assumptions for oncology clinicians facing the dilemma of choosing treatment or no treatment.

Findings of this study are consistent with the other studies looking at the safety of SACT during pandemic. However, there are certain differences in patients' demographics. The study population in this report is younger and Breast cancer is the most common diagnosis as opposed to Lung cancer in other studies. This may have contributed to better treatment tolerance and immunity against infections. The results of this study provide important results for future comparative studies in the region and other parts of the world. Some limitations are retrospective data from a single cancer center and small sample size. It may not fully reflect the feasibility and timely delivery of cancer therapy in other patient populations during pandemic situations in other geographical locations with entirely different logistic and healthcare situations.

Systemic anticancer therapy can be safely administered in a timely manner during pandemic with strict adherence to infection prevention measures without any treatment delays. The complication rate including incidence of febrile neutropenia was low.

CONSENT

It is not applicable.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

Ethical approval was obtained from Dubai Scientific research ethics committee (ethics code: DSREC-09/2020_25).

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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