

Therapeutic decision making and the multidisciplinary team

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As the management of cancer becomes more complex, it becomes impossible for an individual clinician to have the competence that is necessary to manage all patients presenting with a particular type of tumour. The formation of multidisciplinary teams represents an attempt to make certain that each and every patient with a particular type of cancer is managed appropriately. Teams should not only be multidisciplinary – they should also be multiprofessional. The advantages and disadvantages of multidisciplinary teams are summarised in Table 12.4. The multidisciplinary team needs to answer three basic questions for every patient: What is the patient's diagnosis, stage and molecular characteristics of disease? What is the goal of treatment for the patient? In simple terms, this can be divided into cure, prolongation of life and palliation of symptoms. What treatment options are there to achieve these aims with the fewest possible side effects? Options may include surgery, radiotherapy, anti-cancer systemic (drug) treatment, symptom control measures, a combination of these options and, in some cases, observation. The clinical team makes recommendations, rather than definite treatment decisions. Several other factors must be considered, which can only be done by a clinician making a direct assessment of the patient's health and wishes. The clinician must ascertain the patient's fitness and hence their ability to tolerate treatment. This will be heavily influenced by comorbidities. Patients vary greatly in their willingness to tolerate treatment for a given benefit and particularly how they value quality of life compared with length of life or chance of cure. There are often several possible treatment plans and the clinical team must take the time to explain the options carefully to the patient and the patient's supporters. In many cancer centres, there will be both standard-of-care and research options available for patients. Explanations should include what is involved in the treatment, what benefits may result and the chance of the patient receiving those benefits. The clinical team must also explain the possible downsides of treatment and the likelihood of experiencing them. Patients are often faced with a large amount of complex and difficult information at a time when they are extremely vulnerable. The clinical team must support patients to reach a decision and this may take time and repeated explanation.

TABLE 12.4 The advantages and disadvantages of the multidisciplinary team. Advantages Open debate concerning management of complex patients with many specialists Decision making is open, transparent and explicit Team members educate each other A useful educational experience for trainees and students Performance can be monitored by managers

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