

Oncology care in the era of pandemics

H. Majeed MD MSc*

Since the declaration by the World Health Organization on 11 March 2020 of a global pandemic from SARS-CoV-2, the public health impact on broader society has been unprecedented. As of 12 April 2020, the World Health Organization had reported 1,696,598 cases of COVID-19 (the disease resulting from the virus) globally, with 105,952 deaths (<https://covid19.who.int/>). At the same time within Canada, there had been more than 23,301 confirmed cases, with 653 deaths (<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection.html>). The resulting burden has posed numerous challenges for patients, their families, and national health systems. Every nation has to strike the balance between managing constraints on resources and ensuring that the care and safety of patients and frontline health care workers remain the top priority.

Numerous recommendations are being developed to provide safe cancer care in the era of SARS-CoV-2, including those to help manage the health care workforce¹, prioritize clinical trials², and even adjust systemic therapy and radiation regimens to treat patients in anticipation of delays in surgical management³. While much academic research will justifiably be undertaken to look at strategies to mitigate transmission and treat those infected with SARS-CoV-2 in the broader population, there is also a need for research to assess the impact of the pandemic on the oncology population.

In this issue of *Current Oncology*, Gill and colleagues⁴ present results of the first national survey of medical oncologists in Canada assessing the impact of COVID-19 on how they deliver cancer care. In the survey, more than 70% of respondents expressed concern with respect to contracting the virus, and more than two thirds (69%) felt uncertain about access to adequate personal protective equipment. An impact on patient care has also been felt, with increasing use of telemedicine (82% of respondents) and, in certain centres, complete cessation of clinical trials enrolment (54% of respondents). Oncologists are having to decide whether to switch treatments, with factors such as prognosis and anticipated treatment benefit, risk of

toxicity during a time of scarce health resources, and the patient's personal risk of contracting COVID-19 affecting their decision-making.

Like other journals, *Current Oncology* will be prioritizing review and publication of manuscripts that help to address relevant clinical issues in this difficult time⁵. Relevant topics could include identification of variables that confer high risk of morbidity and mortality from COVID-19 in oncology patients and assessments of novel interventions and processes that prevent transmission in oncology patients and associated health workers. Throughout the pandemic, *Current Oncology* will remain committed to providing readers with the most up-to-date literature and evidence in the field of oncology.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURES

I have read and understood *Current Oncology's* policy on disclosing conflicts of interest, and I declare that I have none.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

*Sunnybrook Odette Cancer Centre, Toronto, ON.

REFERENCES

1. Fraher EP, Pittman P, Frogner BK, *et al.* Ensuring and sustaining a pandemic workforce. *N Engl J Med* 2020;[Epub ahead of print].
2. de Paula BHR, Araújo I, Bandeira L, Barreto NMPB, Doherty GJ. Recommendations from national regulatory agencies for ongoing cancer trials during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Lancet Oncol* 2020;[Epub ahead of print].
3. BC Cancer. *Provincial Cancer Clinical Management Guidelines in Pandemic Situation (COVID-19)*. Vancouver, BC: BC Cancer; 2020. [Available online at: <http://www.bccancer.bc.ca/health-professionals-site/Documents/BCCancerPandemicClinicalManagementGuidelines.pdf>; cited 12 April 2020]
4. Gill S, Hao D, Hirte H, Campbell A, Colwell B. Impact of COVID-19 on Canadian medical oncologists and cancer care: Canadian Association of Medical Oncology survey report *Curr Oncol* 2020;27:71–74.
5. Cannistra SA, Haffty BG, Ballman K. Challenges faced by medical journals during COVID19 pandemic. *J Clin Oncol* 2020;[Epub ahead of print].