Signs, Symptoms, and Characteristics Associated With End of Life in People With a Hematologic Malignancy: A Review of the Literature

Elise Button, RN, MAdPrac (Hons), BN, GCertPC, Raymond Chan, RN, PhD, MAppSc, BN, FACN, Shirley Chambers, PhD, BHIthSc (Hons), Jason Butler, MBBS (Qld), MMEdSc (ClinEpid), FRACP, FRCPA, and Patsy Yates, RN, PhD, MSocSc, DipAppSc, BA

Hematologic malignancies include leukemia, lymphoma, multiple myeloma, myeloproliferative neoplasms, and myelodysplastic syndromes (Swerdlow et al., 2008). These malignancies differ from solid tumors, most notably in the involvement of the bone marrow, leading to issues such as bleeding, infection, and anemia (Pallister & Watson, 2011). The clinical course and prognosis for people with a hematologic malignancy vary significantly depending on many factors, including the type and specific subtype of the disease, response to treatment, and personal characteristics of the patient (Hung et al., 2013; Pallister & Watson, 2011). Certain diseases, such as acute leukemia, advance rapidly and are imminently fatal (Pallister & Watson, 2011), whereas other malignancies, such as low-grade lymphoma, often follow an indolent illness trajectory (Matasar & Zelenetz, 2008). Aggressive treatment often holds dual potential for cure and mortality (Ezzone & Schmit-Pokorny, 2007).

The illness trajectory of a person with a hematologic malignancy differs from that of a person with solid tumors (Auret, Bulsara, & Joske, 2003; Maddocks, Bentley, & Sheedy, 1994) and shares more similarities with the illness trajectory of a person with organ failure (i.e., heart and lung failure) in the context of...