Improving the Pain Experience for Hospitalized Patients With Cancer

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Pain is a significant and multidimensional problem for patients diagnosed with cancer. The National Comprehensive Cancer Network (NCCN, 2018) adult pain guidelines advise providers to consider hospitalization of patients suffering from “acute, severe pain, or pain crisis” (p. MS-7). Cancer pain has several potential causes. Most often, pain is caused by tumor burden, but cancer treatments and unrelated comorbid conditions may also produce pain (American Cancer Society, 2018). Inadequate management of cancer pain denies comfort and acceptable quality of life, and may even reduce survival (NCCN, 2018). Cancer pain may produce emotional distress, with prolonged duration and higher pain intensity associated with depression (National Cancer Institute, 2018). Patients with cancer may fear addiction, developing tolerance, side effects, or the implications of needing opioid analgesics (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, 2016). These many features of cancer pain affect the patient’s pain experience and the professional caregiver’s ability to influence this experience.

The Hospital Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems (HCAHPS) survey (Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, 2017; Giordano, Elliott, Goldstein, Lehrman, & Spencer, 2010) sought to measure patient satisfaction with pain management by asking discharged patients requiring pain medication during their admission to answer always, usually, sometimes, or never to two pain-related questions: “How often was your pain well controlled?” and “How often did the hospital staff do everything they could to help you with your pain?” Composite pain satisfaction HCAHPS scores on an adult medical oncology inpatient unit caring for patients with solid tumors was 58% from May to July 2017, indicating an opportunity to reduce suffering in this vulnerable population. Nurses, in the role of patient caregivers, advocates, and educators, are in a unique position to influence the pain experience of individuals with cancer; therefore, an