Changes in Breast Radiotherapy: Prone Positioning and Hypofractionation

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Breast cancer management has drastically changed since the 1990s. Many patients with breast cancer now can opt to conserve their breast through a lumpectomy and radiation (breast conservation therapy), rather than a full mastectomy. Advances in the techniques of delivery and length of breast radiotherapy have been rapidly evolving. This article attempts to summarize some of those changes for nurses caring for patients with breast cancer during radiation therapy.

Breast Conservation Therapy

Fisher et al. (2002) reported evidence gathered during a 25-year period that showed BCT can be the appropriate therapy for women with breast cancer who have negative surgical margins. Women in this pivotal trial were treated with lumpectomy and radiotherapy over five weeks without increased recurrence rates, proving that lumpectomy followed by irradiation continues to be appropriate therapy for women with breast cancer. The historical trial confirmed the merit of breast conservation radiotherapy. Historically, breast radiation following lumpectomy always was delivered in the supine position, which has the patient lying face up; the prone position, however, involves the patient lying face down, sometimes with the hands behind the head or neck.

Radiotherapy Positioning

When patients are treated with breast radiotherapy in the traditional supine position, the heart and lungs receive higher doses of radiation. A recent study by Darby, McGale, Taylor, and Peto (2005) reported that U.S. cancer radiotherapy regimens from the 1970s–1980s appreciably increased mortality 10–20 years following treatment from heart disease for left-sided breast cancer and lung cancer in the ipsilateral lung. During the study time frame, 1973–2001, women were treated with radiation in the supine position. A subsequent study update in 2013 demonstrated a proportional increase in the rate of coronary events per Gy of radiation to the heart, even for women without a baseline cardiac risk at the time of radiation (Darby et al., 2013). In the 25 years since the advent of BCT, radiation therapy delivery methods have vastly improved, lowering the amount of irradiation to the heart and lungs during treatment (Formenti et al., 2007).

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