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Brain Tumour Foundation of Canada is generously supported by individuals, corporations and employee groups. It is through the tireless dedication of donors that help is available for anyone affected by a brain tumour, including patients, survivors and their loved ones.

Ask the Expert Information Sheet

Tips for Radiation Therapists Working with Patients undergoing Brain Radiotherapy

By: Caitlin Gillan MRT(T) BSc MEd FCAMRT

As radiation therapists, we are at the front line of the delivery of technical cancer care, but are also uniquely positioned to offer supportive, empathic care – ‘high touch’ care as well as ‘high tech’ care. In an era of personalized medicine, we can also work to deliver personalized attention to each patient. Each will have unique needs in terms of side effects, emotional distress and coping, navigating the system, and otherwise juggling their diagnosis and other aspects of their life. For patients receiving radiotherapy for brain tumours, there are considerations to help provide the best experience possible. The following is a list of things that can be kept in mind when working with people receiving brain radiotherapy. It is hoped that it can serve as a valuable reflective tool for healthcare professionals.

- It is easy, when treating the brain, to forget your patient’s specific diagnosis. The day-to-day process may be the same in terms of patient positioning, tumour targeting, and treatment delivery, but there are vast differences between a benign acoustic neuroma and a GBM, and between a tumour in the frontal lobe and one abutting the brainstem. Try to remind yourself of the specifics of your patient’s tumour before treatment each day. Concurrent treatment prognosis, symptoms, side effects, and other factors may differ significantly between patients and could require tailored approaches to sensitive and informed care.
- Patients with brain tumours often have sequelae that are less obvious than in other diagnoses. They may not have diarrhea or hemoptysis, distressingly visible masses, or shortness of breath, but the impacts of both the mass and the treatment can be significant. Constant nausea, dizziness, and fatigue can drastically affect a patient’s quality of life and being empathetic to this can be reassuring to a patient.
- Do not underestimate the trauma of hair loss. While it may seem to be a cosmetic issue, the hair loss that can accompany radiotherapy can be distressing. Where possible, try not to treat it as an afterthought when discussing side effects, and do not downplay a patient’s concern. Sometimes familiarizing yourself with specific beam angles and advising patients exactly where their hair loss is expected to occur can help patients to cope. Referrals

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Additional support, information and education offered by Brain Tumour Foundation of Canada:

Adult, Pediatric and Non-Malignant Brain Tumour Handbooks available in English and French.

"A Friend in Hope" children's storybook available in English and French.

20+ Adult Support Groups across Canada (in-person and virtual)

Toll-free information and support line

BrainWAVE Pediatric Support Program

Print BrainStorm Newsletter
Email Newsletters:
• E-BrainStorm
• Peace of Mind

"Grey Matters" Blog

All patient resources are available free-of-charge in Canada. Call 1-800-265-5106 or visit www.BrainTumour.ca for additional details and information.

to wig salons, or strategies for 'in style' scarves or hats can validate a patient's concern.

- A cancer diagnosis is a life-changing event and can throw a person's world into a tailspin. That alone can cause patients to exhibit stress-related behaviours that might not be typical for them. The cognitive impact of certain brain tumours can also deeply affect a person's personality – forgetfulness, short temper, rudeness etc. Keep this in mind before labelling a patient as 'difficult'. Patients themselves, as well as their accompanying family members, can be embarrassed and distressed by their own behaviours, and patience and understanding of challenging behaviours can demonstrate compassion.
- Loss of autonomy can be a significant issue for brain tumour patients. Many will require ambulatory support due to dizziness or ataxia, have hearing or vision loss, or have lost their driver's licenses due to their diagnosis. Wherever possible, support their ability to make their own decisions and exert control over their situation.

As a healthcare professional seeing your patient upwards of 30 times over the course of treatment, you are uniquely positioned to be attuned to and address your patient's individual needs. Complementing quality technical care with tailored patient-centered care can improve quality of life and patient experience.

Author:

Caitlin Gillan MRT(T) BSc MEd FCAMRT, is a radiation therapist at the Princess Margaret Cancer Centre, working primarily with adults and children with brain tumours as the Central Nervous System (CNS) Radiation Therapy site leader. Caitlin was a 2016 recipient of the Brain Tumour Foundation of Canada Professional Development Grant.



braintumour
foundation
OF CANADA

205 Horton St E
Suite 203
London, Ontario
N6B 1K7

T 519.642.7755
1 [800] 265.5106
F 519.642.7192
www.braintumour.ca

