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Virtual Opioid Prescribing Training for Hematology/Oncology Fellows

Background: Opioid management for pain in cancer care, as well as benign hematological conditions, is common and complicated. Centers for Disease Control 2016 opioid guidelines appropriately exclude patients with active cancer, those with sickle cell disease, and those receiving palliative care, but challenges remain common, including “aberrant behaviors” and undertreated pain. Given increasing attention to opioid prescribing, a nuanced understanding of best practices and management of these agents is timely and needed for hematology/oncology fellows who frequently prescribe them. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, introducing training programs that are both remote and effective is crucial, accounting for “Zoom fatigue” as well as adult learners’ needs for active engagement. Opioid management requires a mastery of safe prescribing, pharmacodynamics, and pharmacokinetics, necessitating facilitated hands-on learning. This remote curriculum is a novel contribution to an unprecedented situation in medical education.

Design: The program is 3 hour-long Zoom educational workshops to be delivered to Vanderbilt hematology/oncology fellows in December. The content is a guided case-based skills session delivered in a small group format, facilitated by a team of palliative medicine and hematology/oncology physicians. After each session, the workshop will be iterated and improved upon. We completed a pre-assessment of the fellows; a post-assessment is anticipated.

Results: Fellows were assessed on a 4-point confidence scale from 1= “needs further basic instruction” to 4= “confident to perform independently” across a range of opioid management skills. Fellows express high perceived educational needs; most self-assessed as needing supervision in some or all facets. Prior palliative medicine experience was variable with 1 fellow reporting no prior experience; 2/3 of fellows completed a residency elective in palliative care.

Conclusions: Palliative medicine training is effective in numerous specialties and improves quality of care. Hematology/oncology fellows will benefit significantly from hands-on training in pain management. The pandemic necessitates novel approaches to medical education.