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OP-04

How patients who refused radiotherapy in northern Sri Lanka understand radiation as a treatment modality for cancer

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Introduction: Colloquially referred to as “current treatment”, radiotherapy is a feared cancer treatment modality in northern Sri Lanka. A significant proportion of patients seeking care at Tellippalai Trail Cancer Hospital, either refuse or discontinue radiotherapy, even in the curative setting, leading to poor clinical outcomes.

Objectives: This study explores patient perceptions that underlie decisions to refuse/discontinue radiotherapy in northern Sri Lanka.

Methods: An exploratory descriptive qualitative study was carried out among 14 patients who refused/discontinued radiotherapy at Tellippalai Trail Cancer Hospital. Participants were selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews by members of the research team who were not directly involved in treating the patients.

The interviews were transcribed in Tamil, translated into English, coded using QDA Miner Lite (v2.0.8) software, and thematically analyzed. Two researchers reached consensus at each stage of the analysis.

Results: All participants referred to radiotherapy as “current” with several understanding the procedure to involve heated rods, hot vapour, and/or electricity being placed on/transmitted to the tumour. Many pointed to gaps in the information provided by healthcare providers. The latter were perceived to focus on side effects of radiotherapy without sufficiently discussing the methods and procedures that radiotherapy entails. While patients trusted the information shared by healthcare providers, in the absence of these crucial details, they relied on family

members, neighbours, and villagers, to fill the gaps, often based on second or third hand (at times terrifying) accounts of experiences with radiotherapy. Many participants indicated that they felt pressured by family members and loved ones to refuse radiation. Others spoke of fearing radiation, feeling ashamed to discuss their treatment plan with family members due to the cancer site (e.g., penis, cervix), and COVID-19, as reasons for refusing or discontinuing radiotherapy. However, all but three patients claimed they would recommend radiation to patients with cancer, especially when it was offered with curative intent, while the remainder were non-committal or felt radiation involved unacceptable side effects and suffering.

Conclusion: Patients with cancer who refused or discontinued radiotherapy in northern Sri Lanka have significant information needs, in particular, regarding the methods and procedures of radiotherapy. Steps need to be taken to address these needs, involving not only the patients but also their family members.

Keywords: Radiotherapy, Misconceptions, Fear, Cancer care, Northern Sri Lanka