

Commentary on: Educational Needs, Perception, and Perspectives of Oncologists Regarding Compassionate Use Programs in Asia

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DESCRIPTION

Compassionate Use Programs (CUP) is an important way of accessing innovative drugs, much before they are commercially available. These drugs are provided free of cost to terminally ill patients who often do not have other treatment options available. CUPs are particularly useful in oncology where high unmet need and limited life expectancy in many advanced tumours, makes it an important tool to help patients and advance patient care. Most pharmaceuticals launch compassionate use program once there is compelling evidence about drug's efficacy and safety and prior to its regulatory approval. The eligibility criteria are often not as intense as clinical trials and they offer an important step in the advancement of patient care.

However, there are many challenges to such compassionate use programs. There is lack of standard protocols or information which could help oncologists know about such programs. Also, the regulations differ in different countries and often lack of clarity makes it more complex. Physicians need to spend considerable time and resources in order to seek access to drugs on compassionate ground. Patient communication is key in explaining the rationale for starting drugs which may not be locally approved. Also, they may not have been trained on compassionate use or have prior use of accessing these drugs [1].

In an article published by Singh, et al. in 'Current Medical Research and Opinion', authors conducted a survey using a questionnaire provided online to 111 oncologists from Asian countries (India, Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan, and Thailand). This was voluntary through a self-administered and closed-ended questionnaire through an online platform. The objective of this study was to capture the educational needs, perceptions, and perspectives of oncologists towards CUPs. The questionnaire

consisted of 13 questions which were meant to gather insights on demographics, educational needs and the perception and perspectives.

The results represent both public and private healthcare with more than half of the oncologists having at least 10 years of experience after their specialization. It was important to notice that most of the respondents reported that there were no resources or training provided to them related to CUPs. A significant majority of them seemed clear on the pharmaceutical regulations which also could be due to the inclusion of only those oncologists who had prior experience of requesting access on compassionate grounds. In other words, this could be due to selection bias. However, despite this fact, almost half of them reported lack of clarity on the country regulations or regulatory process. The need to have educational modules addressing few of these needs was noted through the results.

Although limited by the sample size and number of countries included, this study still brings out challenges faced by oncologists in accessing drugs on compassionate grounds. There seems to be a clear need to focus on education and training which would make it easy for them to access drugs on compassionate grounds. Various stakeholders can work together to address various challenges faced by oncologists. Addressing these issues will truly help advance patient care and improve access to innovative drugs before they are commercially available.

REFERENCE

1. Singh M, Jain A, Fang W, Ong P, Uehara R, Zhong J. Educational needs, perception, and perspectives of oncologists regarding compassionate use programs in Asia. *Curr Med Res Opin.* 2021; 37 (9): 1609-1615.

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