Research Article

Breakthrough Cancer Pain: What Role can the General Practitioner Play?

Massimo Mammucari¹, Sebastiano Mercadante², Paolo Marchetti³, Arturo Cuomo⁴, Augusto Caraceni⁵, Rocco Domenico Mediatì⁶, Renato Vellucci⁷, Silvia Natoli⁷, Marzia Lazzari⁷, Mario Dauri⁵, Claudio Adile², Mario Airoldi⁴, Giuseppe Azzarello⁶, Mauro Bandera⁸, Livio Blasi¹, Giacomo Carteni¹, Bruno Chiurazzi¹, Benedetta Veruska Pierpaola Costanzo¹³, Daniela Degiovanni¹, Flavio Fusco¹, Vittorio Guardamagna¹⁶, Vincenzo Iaffaioli¹⁷, Simeone Liguori¹⁸, Loredana Palermo¹⁹, Sergio Mameli⁰, Francesco Masedu²¹, Rodolfo Mattioli²², Teresita Mazzei²³, Rita Maria Melotti²⁴, Valentino Menardo²⁵, Danilo Miotti²⁶, Stefano Moroso²⁷, Gaetano Pascoletti²⁸, Stefano De Santis²⁹, Remo Orsetti²⁵, Alfonso Papa³¹, Sergio Ricci³², Elvira Sclizzi³³, Michele Sofia³⁴, Giuseppe Tonini³⁵, Alessandro Valle³⁶, Carlo Chiaromonte³⁷ and on behalf of the IOPS-MS Study Group

¹Primary Care Unit, ASL RM1, 00165 Rome, Italy
²Anesthesia and Intensive Care & Pain Relief and Supportive Care, La Maddalena, Italy
³Molecular and Clinical Medicine Medical Oncology, La Sapienza University of Rome, Italy
⁴Anesthesiology, Resuscitation, and Pain Therapy Department, National Cancer Institute, IRCCS Foundation, Italy
⁵Palliative Care, Pain Therapy and Rehabilitation, National Cancer Institute, IRCCS Foundation, Italy
⁶Palliative Care and Pain Therapy Unit, Careggi Hospital, Italy
⁷Department of Clinical Science and Translational Medicine, University of Rome Tor Vergata, Italy
⁸Second Medical Oncology Division, Città della Salute e della Scienza Hospital of Turin, Italy
⁹Medical Specialties Department, Oncology and Oncologic Hematology, Italy
¹⁰Medical Oncology Unit, Ospedale di Circolo e Fondazione Macchi Hospital, Italy
¹¹Medical Oncology Unit, ARNAS Ospedale Civico Di Cristina Benfratelli, Italy
¹²Medical Oncology, A.O.R.N. Cardarelli, Italy
¹³Palliative Care Unit, SAMO ONLUS, Italy
¹⁴Palliative Care Unit, ASL AL, Italy
¹⁵Palliative Care Unit, Department of Primary and Community Care, ASL 3 Genovese, Italy
¹⁶Palliative Care and Pain Therapy Unit, European Oncology Institute IRCCS, Italy
¹⁷Abdominal Medical Oncology, National Cancer Institute, IRCCS Foundation Pascale, Italy
¹⁸Palliative Care and Pain Therapy Unit, Papa Giovanni XXIII Hospital, Italy
¹⁹Medical Oncology Unit, National Cancer Research Center “Giovanni Paolo II”, Italy
²⁰Pain Therapy Unit, “A. Businco” Hospital, ASL 8, Italy
²¹Department of Biotechnological and Applied Clinical Sciences, Section of Clinical Epidemiology and Environmental Medicine, University of L’Aquila, Italy
²²Medical Oncology Unit, S. Croce Hospital, Italy
²³Section of Clinical Pharmacology and Oncology, Department of Health Sciences, University of Florence, Italy
²⁴Department of Medicine and Surgery Sciences, University of Bologna, Italy
²⁵Pain Therapy, S. Croce e Carle Hospital, Italy
²⁶Pain Therapy ICS Maugeri, IRCCS Foundation, Italy
²⁷Medical Oncology, Azienda Sanitaria Universitaria Integrata di Trieste, Italy
²⁸Medical Oncology, Azienda Sanitaria Universitaria Integrata di Udine, Italy
²⁹Palliative Care and Oncologic Pain Service, S. Camillo-Forlanini Hospital, Italy
³⁰Pain Medicine Unit, S. Camillo-Forlanini Hospital, Italy
³¹Pain Relief, A.O. Dei Colli, Monaldi Hospital, Italy
³²Division of Medical Oncology, Department of Oncology, S. Chiara University Hospital, Italy
³³Medical Oncology, Castelfranco Veneto Hospital, Italy
³⁴Department of Palliative Care with Hospice and Pain Therapy Unit, “G. Salvini” Hospital, Italy
³⁵Department of Medical Oncology, Campus Bio-Medico University of Rome, Italy
³⁶Palliative Care, FARO Foundation, Italy
³⁷Department of Statistics, University Hospital of Tor Vergata, Italy
Abstract

Background: Despite the extensive literature, Breakthrough cancer Pain (BTcP) is still under-diagnosed and under-treated. Although cancer pain affects quality of life, primary care physicians do not seem to play a role in the management of patients with BTcP.

Objectives: Point out the clinical characteristics that can help the general practitioner to identify the patient early with cancer pain and in particular with BTcP.

Methods: We studied the clinical data base of 4,016 patients enrolled in the IOPS-MS study in order to identify which clinical parameters of BTP can be early detected by primary care physicians.

Results: The results of the study show that BTcP occurs during each phase of cancer, 2.4±1.4 times per day, with a duration of 43.3±36.9 minutes, and it manifests 1.9±5.6 months after the onset of baseline pain.

Conclusion: These data suggest that the BTcP cannot be under diagnosed if the general practitioner plans a periodic visit to each cancer patient. Therefore, the involvement of the general practitioners, through periodic screening and the use of standardised diagnostic algorithms aimed at starting the multidisciplinary care pathways in an early phase, may improve the level of satisfaction and quality of life of patients with cancer pain.

Keywords: Breakthrough pain; General practitioner

Introduction

The clinical phenomenon of Breakthrough cancer Pain (BTcP), also known as intense episodic pain, has been discussed in international literature for many years [1,2]. BTcP occurs with painful, spontaneous or triggered episodes with a relatively short duration. It affects cancer patients when the background pain (constant pain experienced for more than twelve hours a day) is already being controlled for most of the time [2]. BTcP is of considerable clinical relevance since it affects quality of life and interferes with the treatment of cancer patients [3]. Moreover, this type of pain involves a substantial consumption of healthcare resources [4]. Due to differences in definitions or research methods, various types of episodic pain have been described over the years [5]. Some studies carried out on large numbers of patients [3,6-9] suggest that the features of BTcP (intensity, duration, onset, resolution time of the painful episode) depend on the type of tumour, the existence of metastases and the Karnofsky index, and confirm the need for personalised treatment [10]. Some authors have pointed out the difficulty of the general practitioner in oncology patient management [11], and in particular of pain [12]. For this reason, we wanted to analyse the clinical aspects of episodic pain which can be more easily detected by the general practitioner, in order to facilitate a rapid therapeutic diagnostic classification of patients with cancer pain.

Materials and Methods

This study consists in a secondary analysis of the IOPS-MS a multicentric study [13] involving 32 Italian clinical centres which, upon approval from their ethics committees, recruited patients presenting each stage of oncological disease, with a steadily controlled background pain of ≤4 (measured on an 11-point Numeric Rating Scale, NRS) for at least seven days, who were reporting painful episodes that were clearly distinctive from the background pain. Patients experiencing uncontrolled background pain (NRS >4), or those who had not provided informed consent, were excluded. The clinical-medical history parameters, clinical conditions, characteristics of the baseline pain and episodic pain, treatments used and the results obtained, were collected for each patient. The episodic pain diagnosis was carried out by means of a standard diagnostic algorithm (Table 1). Thanks to the involvement of 175 investigators (oncologists, pain therapists, palliative care specialists), it was possible to enrol patients from a variety of healthcare settings (wards, day hospitals, clinics, hospices and at home care).
Clinical information was collected using an electronic clinical report form. Data were checked and validated before being analysed. Descriptive statistics were carried out: average and SD for continuous variables, absolute and relative frequencies for categorical variables. Descriptive analyses were carried out for all patients and all subgroups. A Chi-squared test, a Student’s t-test (using the Bonferroni-Holm method) and a 1-way ANOVA (preceded by analysis of the theoretical distribution-kurtosis and the between-group and within-group variance test), were performed in order to obtain a correct inference analysis of all possible differences. Statistical parametric and non-parametric tests were used to assess possible interdependence between 2 or more variables and the possible associations between clinical characteristics and therapeutic interventions administered and entered in the clinical report form. The Chi-squared test (with calculation of the odds ratio when the bivariate 2x2), the Student’s t-test and the variance analysis (F Fisher and post-hoc LSD test), were carried out to identify the factors correlated to BTcP. The data were processed by using SPSS (IBM, Armonk, NY) version 10.0.

**Results**

In the period from March 2013 to November 2015, a total of 4,056 patients were enrolled in the IOPS-MS a multicentric study [13], of which, 4,016 were evaluable, and 78.0% had recently been or currently under cancer treatment (Table 2).

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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Metastasis %</td>
<td>89.5%</td>
<td>82.0%</td>
<td>84.50%</td>
<td>96.4%</td>
<td>56.7%</td>
<td>91.1%</td>
<td>68.6%</td>
<td>84.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anticancer treatment %</td>
<td>77.10%</td>
<td>71.10%</td>
<td>73.10%</td>
<td>92.70%</td>
<td>81.5%</td>
<td>84.90%</td>
<td>71.80%</td>
<td>78.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karnofsky Index</td>
<td>61±19,7</td>
<td>63,3±18,9</td>
<td>61,9±18,2</td>
<td>62,9±18,1</td>
<td>67,4±18,6</td>
<td>61,0±18,5</td>
<td>61,9±19,4</td>
<td>61,8±18,7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>intensity of basal pain NRS (mean+SD)</td>
<td>2.9±1.1</td>
<td>2.9±1.1</td>
<td>3.1±1.0</td>
<td>3.0±1.0</td>
<td>3.0±1.1</td>
<td>2.9±1.1</td>
<td>3.0±1.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BTP onset (&lt;10min) %</td>
<td>71,70%</td>
<td>66,00%</td>
<td>71,00%</td>
<td>64,50%</td>
<td>69,00%</td>
<td>65,00%</td>
<td>71.0%</td>
<td>68.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration of BTP, min (mean+SD)</td>
<td>42,7±35,1</td>
<td>52,8±42,0</td>
<td>41 +/- 33</td>
<td>41,1±37,7</td>
<td>44+41</td>
<td>47+41</td>
<td>39±35</td>
<td>43,3±37,7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BTP non predictable %</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2:** Site of the tumor, the average performance status (Karnofsky Index), the baseline pain intensity, duration, predictability and time at which the breakthrough pain reaches its highest intensity.
3,188 (79.4%) patients reported episodic pain clearly distinguishable from basal pain with an intensity of 7 to 10, while the remaining 828 (20.6%) reported episodic pain, clearly distinguishable from baseline pain, with moderate intensity (NRS 5 or 6; average NRS of 5.7±0.4) (Table 3).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BTP Characteristics, mean (95% CI) or n (%)</th>
<th>BTP Moderate (NRS 5-6)</th>
<th>BTP severe (NRS&gt;7)</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of BTP/die</td>
<td>2.0 (1.9, 2.1)</td>
<td>2.5 (2.4, 2.5)</td>
<td>p&lt;0.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intensity</td>
<td>5.7 (5.7, 5.8)</td>
<td>8.0 (7.9, 8.0)</td>
<td>p&lt;0.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Onset ≤10 min</td>
<td>535 (64.6%)</td>
<td>2234 (70.1%)</td>
<td>p=0.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Onset &gt;10 min</td>
<td>293 (35.4%)</td>
<td>954 (29.9%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration (min)</td>
<td>41.0 (36.1, 46.0)</td>
<td>43.7 (41.4, 46.0)</td>
<td>p=0.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Predictable</td>
<td>291 (35.1%)</td>
<td>934 (29.3%)</td>
<td>p=0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non predictable</td>
<td>537 (64.9%)</td>
<td>2254 (70.7%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Characteristics of moderate (NRS 5-6) and intense BTP (NRS>7).

30.6% of enrolled patients reported basal pain with an intensity of NRS 0 to 2, while 69.4% reported intensity of NRS 3 to 4 (Table 4).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Basal pain NRS</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. of pts</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>895</td>
<td>1145</td>
<td>1641</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral Equivalent Morphine, mean (95% CI) [N]</td>
<td>112.1</td>
<td>100.4</td>
<td>92.0</td>
<td>97.0</td>
<td>103.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(95% CI)</td>
<td>(93.1, 131.2)</td>
<td>(83.1, 117.5)</td>
<td>(85.1, 98.9)</td>
<td>(91.3, 102.7)</td>
<td>(97.7, 109.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BTP intensity, mean (’*)</td>
<td>6.8±1.4</td>
<td>7.0±1.4</td>
<td>7.1±1.2</td>
<td>7.5±1.2</td>
<td>7.8±1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(95% CI)</td>
<td>(6.6, 7.1)</td>
<td>(6.8, 7.2)</td>
<td>(7.0, 7.2)</td>
<td>(7.4, 7.6)</td>
<td>(7.8, 7.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of BTP/Die, mean (’*)</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(95% CI)</td>
<td>(1.3, 1.7)</td>
<td>(1.6, 2.0)</td>
<td>(1.9, 2.1)</td>
<td>(2.3, 2.5)</td>
<td>(2.6, 2.8)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Intensity of the BTP and the number of BTP/day based on baseline pain. (*) ANOVA p<0.0001 for both intensity and number of BTP.
The number of episodes per day, the duration and the intensity of the BTcP did not seem to be influenced by the stage of the tumour, calculated according to the Classification of Malignant Tumours (TNM) \((p=0.7)\) or to the presence of metastases \((p=0.4)\), while the intensity of the BTcP increased significantly with a reduction in KI \((p=0.0001)\).

It was found that patients reported the occurrence of BTcP 56.6 (51.3, 61.8) days, after the onset of baseline pain \((\text{Pearson } r=0.685 \ p<0.0001)\), while the onset of pain occurred on average after 43.3 (40.5, 46.1) days in those having ongoing treatment for baseline pain.

It was found that patients taking pain relievers reported that episodic pain arose on average 2.9 (2.4, 3.4) months earlier than under other treatment conditions \((p=0.0001)\).

Finally, patients experiencing both intense and moderate BTcP reported a higher level of satisfaction \((p=0.042\text{ and } p=0.000\text{, respectively})\) when taking ROO through intranasal administration (Table 5).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BTP Therapy</th>
<th>Mean meaningful time for pain relief in min, mean (95% CI)</th>
<th>Morphine equivalent dose in mg/day, mean (95% CI)</th>
<th>Mean dose (mcg)/day per BTP, mean (95% CI)</th>
<th>% of pts satisfied</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RAM Trans mucosal Nasal</td>
<td>10.0 (9.4, 10.5)</td>
<td>10.2 (9.5, 10.9)</td>
<td>102.7 (101.4, 104)</td>
<td>705/835 (84.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(N=847)</td>
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<tr>
<td>p&lt;0.0001</td>
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<tr>
<td>RAM Trans mucosal Oral</td>
<td>13.1 (12.3, 13.9)</td>
<td>127.4 (120.6, 134.2)</td>
<td>15.3 (14.2, 16.5)</td>
<td>833/1111 (75.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(N=1304)</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>p=0.001</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Oral morphine (N=563)</td>
<td>18.0 (15.6, 20.5)</td>
<td>88.7 (81.6, 95.8)</td>
<td>20.3 (17.8, 22.7)</td>
<td>413/551 (75.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>($): 4 patients used both; RAM: Trans mucosal Nasal and ROO Trans mucosal Oral; 15 patients ROO Trans mucosal Nasal and Oral morphine; 20 patients ROO Trans mucosal Oral and Oral morphine.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Table 5:** Satisfaction reported by patients receiving morphine or fentanyl (oral and nasal trans mucosal) ($). (*) \(p<0.0001\).
Discussion

In this study 828 patients reported moderate BTcP with an intensity of 5 to 6. These subjects reported a lower average basal pain than the patients with intense BTcP, 2.48±1.2 and 3.1±1.0 respectively. We can assume that subjects experiencing moderate BTcP and controlled baseline pain could be more easily underestimated if not properly investigated. Furthermore, we observed that when patients are experiencing baseline pain with an intensity of 0 to 2 or 3 to 4, 65% and 85% of patients, respectively, are likely to have BTcP with an NRS >7. As confirmation of this, we also observed a linear correlation (p=0.0001) between the intensity of BTcP and the intensity of baseline pain. Furthermore, our data confirm [14] that, even if patients have well-controlled basal pain (NRS=0) they still complain of episodic pain (1.5±1.1 BTcP/day with an intensity of 6.8±1.4). These results suggest that an average difference of 3 or 4 points between the baseline pain and episodic pain may be a useful clinical marker in raising suspicion about the occurrence of BTcP. This variable, if confirmed by further studies, could constitute an alarm signal for the general practitioner, who will then see the usefulness of a diagnostic investigation into the pain.

Our analysis highlights that patients experience painful crises for between 20 and 76 hours per month, with a resulting negative impact on their quality of life. Therefore, patients with cancer should be periodically surveyed with a diagnostic algorithm that takes into account the basic episodic pain even outside the oncologic pathway of care. The IOPS-MS study was designed to investigate the features of oncological BTcP reported by the patients interviewed, using a standard diagnostic algorithm (Table 1) which was applied in various healthcare settings (hospital wards, hospices or home care). As with other instruments [15,16], the algorithm used in the IOPS-MS study has been confirmed as a practical diagnostic tool to detect BTcP [3,6,9,10,13] and it could be also used in the primary care setting between the various specialist follow-ups. Considering also the temporal relationship between the onset of baseline pain and BTcP (1.9±5.6 months, p=0.001), our data confirm that cancer patients reporting pain should undergo at least one investigation per month [13] with the active participation of general practitioners in order to reduce the time lag between the onset of pain and the start of analgesic therapy.

Finally, we observed that patients taking oral trans mucosal rapid onset opioid need a higher average dose of opioids than those using nasal rapid onset opioid. Also for periodic monitoring of opioid-based therapy the GP should play a priority role.

Conclusions

Although many recommendations have been published, there is no international consensus on the diagnosis and treatment of BTcP [15]. The management of the cancer patient, and in particular of the symptoms in palliative care, can cause discomfort in the general practitioners [16,17]. But the role of GP remains crucial to reducing the number of cancer-related hospitalizations for pain [18].

From a practical point of view, our analysis indicates that patients assessed thoroughly using a standard algorithm, report that they can clearly distinguish between baseline pain and episodic pain, that BTcP also occurs even when the baseline pain is steadily controlled, and that the level of satisfaction varies according to the treatment strategy adopted.

BTcP can arise at every stage of cancer disease and therefore an active participation of the GP for early detection of this form of pain can induce substantial benefits (Table 6). We believe that health authorities should invest more to create care pathways where general practitioners, oncologists and other professionals work together to promptly identify patients in need of supportive care. Finally, guidelines should be more calibrated for home-based clinical practice.
Clinical alert | Action | Advantages for patients | Advantages for Health Authorities
--- | --- | --- | ---
Cancer disease | Administer an algorithm to identify the BTP | Early identification of the patient at risk of pain | Reduction of unscheduled hospital access
Lack of periodic medical control | Early estimation of supportive and palliative care needs | Resource optimization
Basal pain NRS < 5 | | | Early implementation of appropriate multidisciplinary care pathways
or | | | Possibility of measuring results on a large scale (audit)
Episodic pain NRS > 4 | | | 
| Patient with baseline analgesia without rescue dose for BTP | | |
Periodic check even if the basic pain is completely controlled | | |
Variation of therapeutic response | | | 
Dissatisfaction with therapy | | | 
Drug interactions | | | 
Higher opioid dose needs | | | 
Opioid intake for a long time | | | 
Depression | | | 
or other pain-related disorders | | | 
Sleep disorders | | | 
Lack of adherence to therapies | | | 
Change in the cure setting or cancer stage | | | 
Any conditions that alters the absorption of drugs (i.e. mucositis, xerostomia, mycosis, etc.) | | |

Table 6: Suggestions for the General Practitioner: some (non-exhaustive) situations in which it is appropriate to apply a diagnostic algorithm for BTP.

**Ethical Dimension**

The 32 centres involved in the study were granted approval from the local ethics committee. All procedures were followed in accordance with the ethical rules for clinical trials and in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki of 1964, amended in 2013. Informed consent was obtained from all patients included in the study.

**Acknowledgements**

The paper is dedicated to Alessandro Sabato and Antonio Gatti who died during the study.

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**References**
