

Letter to the editor

Effect of lockdown due to COVID-19 pandemic on oncological patients with various cancers undergoing treatment in a tertiary care hospital in India

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We have been witnessing an unprecedented event of COVID-19 pandemic worldwide for over a year. India has reported around 27.6 million positive cases and 320,000 deaths till date. The first case of COVID-19 in India was reported on January 30, 2020. From then on, we have witnessed two waves of infection. The peak of the first wave was reached in mid-September 2020, following which there was a down peak of cases. The second wave started in March 2021, reached its peak towards mid May 2021 and is presently on a downslope. India combated against this novel COVID-19 infection initially by a nationwide lockdown that started on 26th March 2020. It was followed as a complete lockdown till June 2020 and various relaxations were introduced from July 2020. During this period, outpatient departments and elective procedures were either performed in a restricted manner or completely stopped. Non COVID-19 patients were mostly unable to attend their routine follow up, out of which oncological patients were one among the most affected group. Nevertheless, being one of the high risk group, they were denied their routine treatments due to this unforeseeable situation.

In our institute, we were routinely performing PET/CT for around 600-700 patients per month in the pre COVID era. But, since the beginning of the pandemic and subsequent lockdown, the number of patients undergoing these investigations were considerably reduced. We analysed the monthly data of inflow of patients with various cancers in our department undergoing PET/CT in 3 different time points- January 2020 representing pre COVID time, September 2020 representing peak during first wave and May 2021 representing the peak during the second wave of infection. The actual number of patients are tabulated below (Table 1). There was a significant drop in the number of patients

who underwent PET/CT during the pandemic as compared to pre COVID times. We found that during the pre-COVID era, approximately 62% of total patients who were undergoing a follow up PET/CT showed disease progression or stable disease. But as we came towards the peak of the first wave and second wave, this increased to 69% and 68% respectively. Even though this difference was not statistically significant, there was a visible trend towards an increase in the number of patients showing disease progression or stable disease.

There is no doubt that the lockdown was effective in controlling the pandemic, but it was at the expense of lack of routine care to the oncological patients. This can be a result of lack of inpatient care due to limited admissions as many hospitals were converted to COVID hospitals, closing down of routine outpatient departments where these patients had their routine check-up and non-availability of treating physicians as they were deputed to be the frontline warriors to fight the pandemic. Also, lack of transportation facilities not allowing patients from reaching the hospital and defaulting medications due to lack of income could have contributed to this.

Some measures taken in our institution to improve the care to these high risk group include relaxation of restrictions for patients attending follow up and conducting telemedicine services. Despite all these efforts, there will be some patients who will be left out due to lack of infrastructure and manpower in some setups owing to their deployment to the current priority - the pandemic. During this pandemic, these high risk group of patients should be given adequate medical care and support rather than focusing entirely on COVID-19. Else when this pandemic ends someday, there will be another pandemic of non-COVID illnesses, who were either left untreated or undertreated during this period.

Table 1: Comparison of number of patients who underwent PET/CT scans at different time points during pandemic

Month	Total patients	Patients who had follow up scans	Progressive disease	Stable disease	Partial response	Complete metabolic response
January 2020	630	339	111 (33%)	98 (29%)	89 (26%)	41 (12%)
September 2020	285	159	62 (39%)	44 (30%)	35 (22%)	18 (9%)
May 2021	125	79	27 (34%)	27 (34%)	20 (26%)	5 (6%)

Keywords

COVID19, EFFECT OF LOCKDOWN, PANDEMIC