

The heart and mind of cancer care

By David M. Mintzer, MD

Medical Director, Pain and Supportive Care Program, Joan Karnell Cancer Center, Pennsylvania Hospital, Philadelphia, PA

A Physician's Guide to Pain and Symptom Management in Cancer Patients (2nd edition)

By Janet L. Abraham, MD

The Johns Hopkins University Press

489 pages. \$24.95

A large part of any community oncologist's practice involves pain and symptom management. Although we all have extensive experience in the use of analgesics, antiemetics, and other palliative measures, there is an expanding body of knowledge on palliative care that we need to keep pace with. When oncologists focus on palliative care, we tend to be most comfortable with managing common physical complaints and may be less well prepared to deal with the psychological, social, and spiritual distresses that sometimes supersede physical suffering. The second edition of *A Physician's Guide to Pain and Symptom Management in Cancer Patients* by Janet L. Abraham, MD, offers guidance not only on pain and symptom treatment but on listening and communication skills as well.

Dr. Abraham, currently the Director of the Pain and Palliative Care Program at the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, has successfully produced a concise and easy-to-read book. She describes it as more of a handbook than a textbook, designed for the busy practicing clinician. Although more than 400 pages long, it is reasonably priced and more compact than a traditional palliative care textbook. Compared with its first edition published in 2000, this volume includes updates on symptom control as well as the care of dying patients and bereaved families.

Among the helpful topics covered:

- assessing and managing pain,
- using standard opioids and non-opioid analgesics,
- alternative delivery systems,
- spinal and interventional therapies,
- adjuvant medications, and
- nonpharmacologic techniques for pain relief including acupuncture, yoga, massage, and mind-body interactions such as hypnosis, biofeedback, art and music therapy.

Peppered throughout the text are useful tables, such as those showing doses and equivalencies for analgesics and antiemetics, and boxes with "Practice Points" giving guidelines for managing mucositis, skin care, etc. Brief case presentations are frequently used to introduce topics and provide a platform for discussions about a variety of issues.

In addition to being well indexed and well referenced at the end of each chapter, there are two useful annotated bibliographies at the end of the book—one for clinicians and one for patients and families. They contain not just articles but also books, Web sites, movies, videos, CD-ROMs, handbooks, and organizations (with contact information) that can serve as valuable resources. The book is also useful for medical students, nurses, and nurse practitioners. I personally found the book helpful when studying for my Board exam in hospice and palliative medicine.

Treating the whole patient

As medicine in general and oncology in particular have become more technologically advanced, we can become increasingly distracted from treating the whole patient. One of the main thrusts of the palliative care movement is to concentrate our efforts on pain and symptom management not just at the end of life, but from the time of diagnosis when suffering actually begins.

As Dr. Abraham's book illustrates, we owe it to our patients and their families to advance our ability to offer both sides of cancer care—for the mind and the body. It's not enough just to be a skilled chemotherapist, and not enough to be just compassionate.

Reading *A Physician's Guide to Pain and Symptom Management in Cancer Patients* is an easy way to review some basics, reassess our own skills and goals, and learn some practical new approaches. Dr. Abraham emphasizes that palliative care represents a unique opportunity for a collaborative approach in medicine: By teaming physicians with nurses, nurse practitioners, social workers, psychologists, hospice personnel, clergy, and others, we can provide optimal results for patients and families. Team members can also help support each other as they deal with difficult situations and losses on a regular basis.