

### **Addressing Sexual Health in Oncology Patients**

### Abordagem da Saúde Sexual em Doentes Oncológicos

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To the Editor,

Cancer is the second leading cause of death in Portugal and in 2020 there were 25 306 new cases of cancer in women (with breast cancer as the leading cause) and 32 436 new cases in men (with prostate cancer as the leading cause).1

Cancer-related sexual dysfunction is highly prevalent (affecting around 50% of survivors of breast and gynecological cancer, 90% of men with prostate cancer, and 20% of survivors of other cancers) by the nature of the disease and its treatments, through changes in body image, self-perception and relationships due to illness.<sup>2,3</sup> Sexual morbidity is associated with poor quality of life, distress, depression, and anxiety, even though it is often overlooked by healthcare providers.3

Physicians should address sexual difficulties upon initial diagnosis and review them during follow-up. The PLIS-SIT (Permission Limited-Information Specific-Suggestions Intensive-Therapy) model of sexual counseling helps clinicians to gather information, relate it to their level of competence, and refer patients to sex therapists if needed.4

The main sexual complaints of oncology patients' are disorders of sexual response, body image, intimacy and relationships, vasomotor symptoms, and genital symptoms.2 Psychological counselling is recommended for all sexual problems.3

Sexual response difficulties, including decreased desire, decreased arousal or anorgasmia can be addressed through regular stimulation for both sexes, and phosphodiesterase type 5 inhibitors (PDE5Is) for erectile dysfunction.<sup>2,5</sup> For men who do not respond to PDE5Is, the alternatives include vacuum erection devices (VED), intracavernous injection therapy, and penile prosthesis.5

Couple-based interventions are recommended in intimacy/relationships and body image disorders, associated with ostomy, alopecia, mastectomy, or others.2

Women's vasomotor symptoms can be relieved with the use of hormone therapy until the average age of menopause (around 51 years). For women unable (hormone-sensitive breast cancer) or unwilling to use it, some possible alternatives are paroxetine, venlafaxine, gabapentin, and clonidine. In men, vasomotor symptoms should be addressed with symptomatic medications: venlafaxine, medroxyprogesterone acetate, cyproterone acetate, and gabapentin.<sup>2,3</sup>

Genital symptoms are frequent in women. Vaginal/vulvar atrophy or dyspareunia can be managed with the daily use of vaginal moisturizers and lubricants during sexual activity. In refractory cases, low-dose vaginal estrogen medication can be tried (dehydroepiandrosterone or ospemifene in postmenopausal women without history of breast cancer). Vaginal dilators are indicated in vaginismus and pelvic floor (Kegel) exercises may help mitigate lower urinary tract symptoms.<sup>2,3</sup> In men, VED daily use is recommended to prevent penis length loss.2

In conclusion, it is imperative for physicians to address sexual health in oncology care.

## **AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS**

MA: Conception and writing of the manuscript. DD, IF: Critical review and approval of the manuscript.

# PROTECTION OF HUMANS AND ANIMALS

The authors declare that the procedures were followed according to the regulations established by the Clinical Research and Ethics Committee and to the Helsinki Declaration of the World Medical Association updated in 2013.

### **DATA CONFIDENTIALITY**

The authors declare having followed the protocols in use at their working center regarding patients' data publication.

### **COMPETING INTERESTS**

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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