

Haematological toxicities: frontline training for nurses

→ Raphaël Brenner

Nurses need to know about haematological toxicities so that they understand how to manage problems and can identify who is at risk and teach patients the danger signs. A Europe-wide course has now been developed to deliver the training.

Haematological toxicities associated with cancer treatment can be debilitating and may rapidly lead to life-threatening conditions if they are not picked up and treated in time. In a novel approach to this problem, a new course has been developed for training nurses. The Training Initiative in Thrombocytopaenia, Anaemia and Neutropaenia (TITAN) is spearheaded by the European Oncology Nursing Society (EONS), in partnership with the biotechnology company Amgen. It aims to improve the prevention, detection and management of these serious treatment side-effects in cancer patients. Nurses are the key to achieving this, as they are in the best position to pick up on problems, to educate patients about what symptoms to look for, and to advise them on prevention and treatment options.

A similar initiative, developed and implemented by the American Oncology Nursing Society (ONS), has been running for some time in the US, under the name of ATAQ (Appropriate Treatment Assures Quality). So a delegation of the EONS expert nursing panel met with leaders of the ATAQ initiative with the

aim of learning more about ATAQ and assessing its suitability for European nursing. It was from this meeting that TITAN was born and a working group established to oversee the project's implementation.

Given that nursing training and practice differ considerably on the two continents, the working group commissioned a study of the learning needs of European oncology nurses regarding haematological toxicities, as a basis for developing the training programme. "Education which is not based on needs is meaningless," insists Jan Foubert, President of EONS and chair of the TITAN working group.

A group of European oncology nursing experts took part in the ONS National Conference on Haematological Toxicities, in Dallas in October 2003, in order to assess how the various components of the ATAQ programme might need adapting for use in Europe.

"By the end of 2003," explains Foubert, "we had a clearer understanding of the learning needs of European nurses and this gave us the basis to develop the TITAN programme based on a common core curriculum and programme structure."



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The next stage of implementation took place in 2004. EONS ran TITAN pilot courses in four countries (Ireland, France, the Netherlands and the UK) in collaboration with each country's national oncology nursing society.

ADAPTING THE US MODEL

Differences in culture and education make it unworkable for EONS to simply copy and import the ATAQ programme from the US into Europe. North American oncology nurses tend to be better trained than their European counterparts and their areas of responsibility are not the same. There are also cultural differences within Europe itself, as well as significant differences in the training and roles of oncology nurses - notably regarding patient education.

The key to ensuring TITAN's success in Europe, says Jan Foubert, was therefore to develop a programme able to deliver key messages to a wide-ranging audience, but flexible enough to be tailored to the needs of individual countries. For instance, in some countries, the course will be delivered by nurses and, in others, by physicians.

A WELCOME CHANCE TO LEARN

The learning needs assessment group consistently found that, although nurses encounter haematological toxicity on a daily basis, few understand its importance. The study of nurses' learning needs showed that nurses are eager to develop their knowledge and welcome more responsibility for educating patients in the prevention and management of haematological toxicities.

"Most nurses say that they are responsible for patient education, but complain that they do not receive specific training in this area," notes Foubert.

"Nurses need to be confident in their knowledge, and this may be one of the great things TITAN offers them," says Shelley Dolan, nurse consultant for cancer and critical care at the Royal Marsden Hospital in London, and a member of the TITAN working group. "Let's not forget that nurses working in oncology are very busy with their clinical practice and suffer from a lack of continuing professional education. So, they clearly welcome evidence-based medicine updates in their field."

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THE PROGRAMME

TITAN's objectives are to:

- _ Provide nurses with updated data on the impact of haematological toxicities on clinical outcomes and on cancer patients' quality of life
- _ Help nurses identify cancer patients at risk of haematological toxicities
- _ Teach innovative and evidence-based methods for educating patients, families and nursing staff
- _ Encourage TITAN participants to actively disseminate the knowledge they have gained

The programme is delivered in three stages. The first is preparatory, and consists of a pre-course booklet of approximately 35 pages, sent to participants at least two weeks before the course. This aims to give them a basic level of background knowledge on haematological toxicities.

The second stage is devoted to learning, and consists of a one-day course on state-of-the-art haematological toxicity management. Nurses attend lectures, presentations of case studies and discussion sessions and there is also an element of informal testing to reinforce learning. A session is also devoted to the strategies and innovative resource materials that can be used in explaining the issues to patients and their families.

The third stage is devoted to teaching. It is a requirement for all participants to undertake a dissemination project in the six-month period following the course. "This is a powerful tool which aims to spread knowledge of haematological toxicities among nursing staff as well as patients," says Jan Ouwerkerk, a clinical nursing expert at Leiden University Medical Centre and member of the TITAN working group. The project can be undertaken individually or in groups and enables the programme to extend its reach by encouraging participants to share their new-found knowledge with colleagues and patients. This could be done via a lunchtime presentation or study day, or through developing information leaflets. These projects, while passing on valuable information, also help

course participants deepen their own knowledge and improve their communication skills.

TOWARDS SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION

The TITAN course was met with great enthusiasm and interest in all four countries where it was piloted. Attendances varied between 30 and 40 participants, mostly experienced oncology nurses, who acknowledged the need for such an initiative and wanted to learn more and to share their experiences with others. Participants' evaluation forms revealed very positive feedback: the programme was viewed as well-organised, well-structured, relevant and informative, and the participants felt it met its objectives to a large degree. The materials used (pre-course pack, course materials and audiovisual aids) were rated as 'good' or 'very good'. Of the programme's three focus areas (thrombocytopaenia, anaemia and neutropaenia), anaemia presented the most difficulties for the nurses. "This may be," says Dolan, "because anaemia is not an immediate life-threatening situation, and is therefore not given prominence."

Following the pilot courses, the material was slightly modified to better emphasise the key messages. TITAN is now ready for use, and Dolan expects it to play a much-needed role in giving European nurses the skills they need to care for cancer patients. "Well trained nurses, who are confident and updated, are able to carry out their vital role of caring for and educating cancer patients. In the case of patients who receive home treatment with oral chemotherapy or chemotherapy delivered by pump, it is of prime importance for them to learn to identify the early symptoms of haematological toxicities and immediately contact their oncology team."

SIGNING UP FOR TITAN

TITAN is available for use by national oncology nursing societies, which are responsible for its diffusion and implementation, as well as providing the relevant faculty. Further information about TITAN is available on the EONS website at www.cancerworld.org. The TITAN programme will be available in Dutch, English, French, German, Italian and Spanish, and may be translated into other European languages in the future.