Development of a Geriatrics Training Initiative in Surgical Oncology: A Learners’ Needs Assessment

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Purpose: More than 60% of new cancers are diagnosed in persons aged ≥ 65 years, and older persons with cancer have an average of at least 3 comorbid conditions. Common cancer therapies may cause geriatric syndromes, including frailty, delirium, functional losses, and adverse drug reactions. Therefore, improving the ability to assess and treat conditions specific to geriatric patients is imperative for those caring for patients with cancer. Because successful training curricula must address target learners’ perceived educational needs, to develop a geriatrics education curriculum for a surgical oncology fellowship, we conducted a learners’ needs assessment (LNA).

Methods: We used a modified geriatric surgery LNA developed at the University of Chicago (UC). Surgical oncology fellows and surgical oncology faculty completed a questionnaire to rank the importance and their comfort level (on a scale of 1 to 5) with specific geriatric topics. Potential geriatrics content was derived from the Curriculum for the Hospitalized Aging Medical Patient faculty development program (www.champ.uchicago.edu) and the UC Urology Resident Geriatric Education program and adapted for surgical oncology fellows. Other sources consulted for topics included the Geriatrics Review Syllabus and Geriatrics at Your Fingertips. Thirty topics were included in the assessment, in the following categories: general geriatrics (e.g., physiologic changes with aging, n=11), hospital care (e.g., delirium, n=12), geriatric oncology (e.g., management of comorbidities in cancer, n=2), and geriatric assessment (e.g., identification of frail or vulnerable patients, n=5). Final topics chosen for curriculum inclusion were ranked based on need, which was calculated for each topic using the mean importance minus mean comfort. Differences in rankings of need were compared between fellows and faculty using the Wilcoxon rank-sum test.

Results: Fourteen of 19 fellows (74%) and 17 of 30 faculty (57%) completed the LNA. Topics of greatest need for fellows were (in descending order) adverse drug events, appropriate prescribing, geriatric assessment, delirium, and aging pharmacokinetics. Greatest perceived need for faculty was for aging pharmacokinetics, quality of life assessment, dementia, and depression. Although there were significant differences between fellows and faculty regarding the importance and comfort for several topics, perceived need was different between the two groups only for osteoporosis.

Conclusions: The LNA helped to identify topics most useful to include in a geriatrics education initiative for surgical oncology fellows. Although fellows had greatest need for topics in geriatric pharmacology and delirium, faculty ranked greatest need in more traditional geriatric topics like quality of life, dementia, and depression. Further evaluation after delivery of educational content will include measures that assess interest and confidence with geriatrics topics.

Keywords: geriatrics, medical education, curriculum development