

Auto Biography of a Cancer Warrior

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Introduction

Radiotherapy is of proven value in head and neck cancers but its side effects are too many and too bothering. Many patients fail to complete full course of therapy. Even I felt nervous and indecisive after 30 sessions as I lost 11 Kgs of weight and extreme weakness. My Onco-radiologist advised me to stop but I insisted to bear and complete course of 35 sessions.

Besides many commonly talked of side effects, I noticed some positive effects too which included improvement in distant vision, reversal of hypertension, fairer complexion and marked improvement in Congenital Ichthyosis.

I am a Diabetologist and myself a patient of Supraglottic Carcinoma (Squamous cell). In my previous article (1) I described various effects and side effects of radiotherapy in chronological manner, up to 2 months after the course was finished. My radiotherapy started on 21st January, 2022 and finished on 27 March, 2022; receiving 35 sessions in total. In this article I intend to describe various events during one year period from May, 2022 to April, 2023.

Negative effects

By May, 2022 my taste had returned and I could enjoy the edibles but oral ulcerations and xerostomia continued. Because of xerostomia floor and roof in the posterior part of pharynx remained stuck to each other and mere swallowing of little oral secretions or a sip of water was a painful act. I had to take a sip of water before swallowing any edible which spoiled the taste of even sweets.

Oral ulcerations were as bad as ever. Even top of the tongue appeared ulcerated due to which I could not consume any spices. Angles of mouth often got cracked (angular cheilitis), due probably to over stretching of mouth as part of regular exercise, advised

by my radiologist. Still taste for salt was on under side as I required extra salt in diet.

Although I had gained 4 kgs after I started taking full meal in the early months of the year but I lost the gained weight by September, 2022. Thereafter I could not gain weight despite enhanced caloric intake. I repeated my PET scan to rule out the possibility of cancer cachexia but it was normal. Even repeated direct laryngoscopy revealed no recurrence. I stopped my regular walk to save calories and gain weight. But gain was only half kg. Now my weight is 58 kgs; before radiotherapy my weight was 68 kgs

Alopecia barbae (baldness of beard) continued and still there were no hair on lower side of jaws and adjacent parts of cheek.

The problem of aspiration which had markedly reduced started returning and became substantial by July, 2022. One special thing, noticed by me, was that problem of aspiration was much more for tea than water. Aspiration worsened the problem of cough and quality and volume of voice.

My teeth had become sharp edged which resulted into recurrent bites on inside of cheek and edges of tongue. Teeth appeared poorly aligned as I could myself bite my cheek and tongue during eating off and on. To reduce the incidence of such bites I consulted a dentist who reduced the sharpness of pre molars and molars.

Positive effects

Besides the negative effects of radiotherapy, described above, I noticed some positive effects too. The first amazing effect was improvement in my distant vision. Previously I needed my spectacles to watch TV from my bed which was approximately 15 feet away. But now I could see it well and even could read most moderate sized captions. To confirm this effect, I went for eye testing and my worse eye, the left one, had shown improvement from +4 diopters to +2 diopters now.

The second positive effect noticed was fairer complexion; despite no decline in Hemoglobin. Complexion of my face improved by approximately 25-30%

The third positive effect was virtual cure of my congenital Ichthyosis due to which my skin on forehead and extensor surfaces of legs, upper arms and fore arms used to become dry, scaly and thickened as the winters approached. To my dismay, my skin remained normal during this winter.

The fourth positive effect, which I owe to reduction in weight, of course due to radiotherapy, was reversal of my Hypertension. I was suffering from Essential Hypertension for over 5 years and needed Telmisartan (40 mg) and Cilnidipine (10 mg) combination daily. But now I am without any anti-hypertensive agent for over one year.

Further Research Required

- Positive effects of radiation need further research to evolve newer indications of radiotherapy.
- Dermatologists and radiotherapists should undertake research to find out safe dose of radiation for fairness of complexion as also to treat Ichthyosis.
- Ophthalmologists and radiologists should join hands to explore why vision improved after radiotherapy and if there was any possibility to utilize this effect clinically.
- As far as issue of hypertension is concerned, it's an established fact that substantial weight reduction can reverse hypertension.

Bibliography

1. LK Shankhdhar *et al.* "Hazards of Radiotherapy in Head and Neck Cancers." *Acta Scientific Orthopaedics* 5.8 (2022).