## Anal cancer: Putting health-related quality of life at the forefront

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Declarations of Interest: None

Anal carcinomas are rare, accounting for 2% of all gastrointestinal malignancies, and are related to human papillomavirus (HPV) [1,2]. In the last three decades there has been an increase in incidence, with females three times more likely to be diagnosed than men [1,2]. Concurrent chemoradiotherapy (CRT) is the standard of care for the majority of patients with 5-year survival rates of over 75% [3]. Whilst patients experience high cure rates, treatment-related toxicity can be a chronic and debilitating disease state. Patients are prone to specific toxicities, such as bowel, urinary and sexual dysfunction, given the high dosage of radiotherapy delivered and sensitive areas irradiated. These toxicities can prompt unintended treatment breaks and radiation dose-reduction, leading to sub-optimal disease-related outcomes. Furthermore, they also impact on patients’ health-related quality of life (HRQoL), not only in the short-term but also well beyond treatment.

Alternative treatment regimens supporting more favourable toxicity profiles are continuously being investigated. Precision radiotherapy techniques such as Volume Modulated Arc Therapy (VMAT) and Intensity Modulated Radiation Therapy (IMRT) are now standard of care in the majority of radiotherapy centres [4]. With improvements in the accuracy of radiotherapy delivery achieved by these techniques, current research is concerned with the identification of optimal radiotherapy dose. The option of dose escalation for high-risk patients and dose de-escalation for lower risk patients with anal cancer has become an important research question, addressed in the current PLATO trial (PersonaLizing Anal cancer radioTherapy dOse, incorporating ACT3, ACT4 and ACT5) [5]. As reduction (or no deterioration) in treatment-related morbidity will be one of the key outcomes of PLATO and future trials, it is key that patient experience of symptomatic toxicity and HRQoL are accurately measured using patient reported outcome (PRO) measures.

Given that treatment-related morbidity is the hallmark of the anal cancer patient experience and forms an integral part of the treatment decision criteria, it is surprising that it is not systematically documented in this patient group as part of routine care [6]. Reasons for this include restricted options for HRQoL measurement in anal cancer patients with a focus on pre-morbid conditions rather than treatment-related effects [7] and no general consensus on core PRO sets [8]. In addition, within the context of clinical trials, quality of reporting has been recognised as inconsistent and inclusion of patient reported outcomes PROs within clinical trials is now accepted as the gold standard for measurement of symptomatic patient experience [7]. Our review of existing PRO measures used with patients with anal cancer [6] revealed that the specific treatment-related effects experienced by this patient group are either overlooked completely or inadequately represented by the measures used, including the EORTC colorectal cancer-specific module (EORTC QLQ-CR29) [9].

In 2013, the European Organisation for Research and Treatment of Cancer (EORTC) Quality of Life Group (QLG), renowned for its development of disease and treatment specific HRQoL measures, supported the development of an anal cancer module to supplement the core EORTC HRQoL questionnaire (EORTC QLQ-C30). Its aim is to assess the HRQoL of anal cancer patients managed with radical CRT. This process follows four key phases of development: 1) generation of HRQoL issues through a systematic review of the literature and interviews with patients and health-care professionals; 2) selection of questionnaire items; 3) an initial pilot testing of the questionnaire; and 4) a larger validation study.

Our systematic review of HRQoL assessment in anal cancer covered 152 publications from 2006-2014 [6] and included 11 studies which used a formal assessment of HRQoL. In order to add to our list of issues captured from the literature, we interviewed 53 patients with anal cancer and 34 health care professionals (HCPs) with expertise in the disease field. Patients and HCPs were representative of different language and cultural settings and patients were recruited across the disease and treatment spectrum ensuring that both acute and late effects (up to 5 years) were identified. A total of 197 initial issues were generated. These were condensed and operationalised into a 65-item questionnaire using the EORTC QLG item library, optimising content validity. Of these questions, 23 described novel issues, not covered by existing EORTC modules. The draft 65-item questionnaire was pilot tested and reviewed for relevance and importance by an additional 100 patients from 8 countries. This initial testing resulted in the removal and re-wording of questions resulting in a 27-item questionnaire, the EORTC QLQ-ANL27 [10], covering 4 areas (domains) of HRQoL concern: bowel, pain or discomfort (relating to both skin and bowel problems), sexual function (male and female), and stoma, as well as five single questions: frequent urination, keeping clean, proximity to toilet, lower limb oedema, and planning activities (Table 1). Having completed phase 3, the EORTC QLQ-ANL27 module is now available for use in clinical trials (<http://groups.eortc.be/qol/>). A larger phase 4 international validation study to confirm its psychometric properties is now underway.

*Insert Table 1 about here*

In summary, our research confirmed that patients suffer significant acute and late side effects of treatment impacting on activities of daily living including bowel, urinary, and sexual function, as well as radiotherapy-related skin reactions and lymphoedema [10]. Our review of the literature [6] identified bowel problems, in particular diarrhoea as a commonly reported side effect of treatment for anal cancer [11,12]. However, in addition to diarrhoea, bowel frequency and incontinence, other issues, such as bowel urgency, toilet dependency, and tenesmus were also important issues reported by patients and clinicians not covered by existing measures [6]. Inclusion of questions related to having a stoma were also felt to be important. Although only a minority of patents will undergo a stoma placement, the HRQol issues surrounding having a stoma are well documented [13]. Alongside bowel problems, sexual dysfunction is also recognised as a common concern of patients with anal cancer [11,12]. Female patients encounter dyspareunia, vaginal dryness, pelvic pain, and vaginal stenosis. In males, impotence is a potential complication [12]. Acute skin toxicity in the radiation field causes burning sensation and severe discomfort and pain, which is exacerbated by movement, sleeping, micturition and defaecation. These issues are not adequately covered by the EORTC QLQ-CR29 module or the radiation proctitis module (EORTC QLQ-PRT21) [14]. Urinary frequency was the main urinary issue reported in the literature and by patients. Lower limb lymphoedema is a relatively uncommon but serious late complication resulting from the irradiation of the pelvic and inguinal nodal regions. Symptoms of lymphoedema were not addressed in existing questionnaires used with patients with anal cancer.

The EORTC QLQ-ANL27 module [10] is the first questionnaire of its kind to measure the specific disease and treatment effects of anal cancer managed with radical CRT. It is designed for use in clinical trials as well as in routine clinical practice. The EORTC QLQ-ANL27 is currently used to assess HRQoL and symptomatic toxicity for all anal cancer patients enrolled in the PLATO trial [5]. The EORTC QLQ-ANL27 can be used by clinicians to measure the impact of anal cancer and its treatment on their patients both within the acute and long-term follow-up context. Thus this recognition of concerns can prompt HCPs to provide the necessarily support (practical or psychological) to patients which is likely to confer HRQoL benefits as well as potentially impacting on disease outcome [15,16]. It is recognised that issues such as those measured by the EORTC QLQ-ANL27 are likely to be under-reported in the current literature, especially those of a sensitive nature such as problems relating to bowel or sexual function [17,18], which might not necessarily come up during clinical assessments and are not adequately addressed by current measures. The EORTC QLQ-ANL27 aims to address this issue.

The EORTC QLQ-ANL27 also addresses a major shortfall in the measurement of the burden imposed by anal cancer and its treatment at a time when measuring patient experience is deemed essential rather than just an addition to other areas of primary interest such as disease outcome [15,19]. The EORTC QLQ-ANL27 offers detailed, relevant data on both acute and chronic disease and treatment-related effects from the perspective of the patient; informative both for clinicians and patients themselves as well as essential for supporting claims regarding improved treatment schedules.

### Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Professor Colin Johnson for his assistance in preparing the manuscript. We would also like to thank our collaborators of the EORTC QLQ-ANL27 module development.

The EORTC QLQ-ANL27 module development project is funded by the European Organization for Research and Treatment of Cancer (EORTC) Quality of Life Group. The grant was awarded to Professor Colin Johnson, Associate Professor Anne Sophie Darlington, and Dr Vassilios Vassiliou.

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