

FONTES DE FINANCIAMENTO

Este trabalho não recebeu qualquer tipo de suporte financeiro de nenhuma entidade no domínio público ou privado.

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Recebido/Received: 14/11/2021 - Aceite/Accepted: 04/02/2022 - Publicado/Published: 01/04/2022

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<https://doi.org/10.20344/amp.17506>



Caring for People with Autism Spectrum Disorder and Cancer

Cuidar de Pessoas com Perturbação do Espectro do Autismo e Doença Oncológica

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorders; Neoplasms; Neurodevelopmental Disorders

Palavras-chave: Neoplasias; Perturbações do Espectro do Autismo; Perturbações do Neurodesenvolvimento

Dear Editor,

The challenges and shortcomings in the mental health-care of patients with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) have been discussed by Teodoro and Salgado.¹ In addition, the authors also commented on the importance of raising awareness concerning specific medical needs of adults with ASD.

Despite having similar or even lower rates of cancer compared to age matched controls, people with ASD are estimated to have twice the odds of death from cancer

compared to non-ASD.² Such differences in outcomes have hypothetically been attributed to inequalities in oncological care.³ Oncology providers should be aware of the challenges of caring for people with ASD and possible solutions.

The lack of clinical research in this field does not enable the development of specific guidelines to enhance oncological care. According to the available evidence on pediatric and adult patients, certain adaptations to the clinical strategy and the environment may benefit ASD patients, while facilitating care provision for healthcare professionals.

First, given the diversity of ASD profiles and needs, it may be useful for clinicians to assess specific needs before the start of the treatment, through interviews with family members and caregivers, preadmission checklists or specialized evaluation of sensory and behavioral profiles.⁴ Patients with ASD benefit from less stimulatory environments, like designated calm and safe spaces.³ The routinization of clinical procedures and limitation of the number of healthcare workers that interact with the patient may also ease the burden of the hospital treatments.³ Previous case

reports on people with ASD and verbal communication or intellectual impairment have highlighted strategies for improving communication through cues or visual aids.³ Obtaining assistance by professionals with experience working with ASD may also provide valuable insights into a better provision of care (Ramos SF, Moura B, Corvacho M, Tavares A. Cancer care for people with autism spectrum disorders: a scoping review. Unpublished text. 2021). Ultimately, collaborative work with caretakers, proxies or family members of the patient appears to be extremely useful for an effective and harmonious care, particularly in more severe cases.³

Despite the growing prevalence rate of people with ASD, there is still a paucity of research regarding the clinical management and relational, person to person, strategies to provide adequate and ASD-informed communication in oncological care.

We urge clinical researchers to focus on the idiosyncrasies of cancer diagnosis and treatment in the ASD popula-

tion in order to help optimize oncological care for this vulnerable population.

AUTHORS CONTRIBUTION

SFR: Conception, design, draft of the paper, critical review.

BM: Conception, critical review.

MC: Conception, critical review.

AT: Critical review.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

FUNDING SOURCES

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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Recebido/Received: 17/01/2022 - **Aceite/Accepted:** 07/02/2022 - **Publicado/Published:** 01/04/2022

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<https://doi.org/10.20344/amp.17915>

