Scientists researching oral and head and neck cancer elucidate recent studies from Dana-Farber Cancer Institute that allow better insights into the biology and outcomes of oral cancer caused by Human Papilloma Virus (HPV). Their findings: patients with oropharynx cancers caused by HPV infection fare dramatically better than those whose disease stems from nonviral factors such as alcohol and tobacco use.

In one study, the 5-year survival rate of patients with oropharynx cancers (back of tongue and tonsils) related to HPV infection was 82 percent, compared with 35 percent for patients without HPV infection. The data were presented from Dana-Farber at the annual meeting of the American Society of Clinical Oncology in Chicago in May.

This enormous difference between HPV-positive and HPV-negative patients is mainly because the virally caused disease is biologically different, and also somewhat because those patients tend to be younger and healthier. A therapy of sequential induction chemotherapy followed by chemoradiotherapy is highly effective in these patients, and the good results are maintained for years.

Most oropharynx and other cancers of the head and neck have been blamed on excessive alcohol and tobacco use, but in the past 25 years an increasing number of cases have been attributed to HPV, a sexually transmitted virus that also causes cervical cancer.

Researchers at Dana-Farber have been involved in a review of such patients compared with those with traditional risk factors treated as part of a large cooperative study started in 1999. This article includes outcome and other data on 111 patients with OPC (oropharynx cancer), half of them infected with HPV virus and the other half being virus-free.

Survival Rates Dramatically Higher Than in Nonviral Cancer
The studies have shown that HPV-associated oropharynx cancer differs in at least two major ways. One, the virus itself is relatively sensitive to chemotherapy, causing the cancer cells to die; and, second, the DNA of the HPV-infected cancer cells is less severely damaged than in cells exposed to tobacco and alcohol. The HPV-infected patients also tend to be younger and healthier, enabling them to withstand treatment and fight the cancer better.

Because oropharynx cancer in these patients is so much more treatable, Dana-Farber investigators believe they can reduce the dosage of radiation used in treatment, which could prevent some of the most disabling long-term side effects. They have launched a study seeking an answer to this question.

The research was funded by sanofi-aventis and the Steven Tendrich Fund for Head and Neck Cancer Research. The investigators are Robert Haddad, MD, and Jochen Lorch, MD, MSc, Dana-Farber; Olga Goloubeva, PhD, MSc, Ming Tan, PhD, Lisa Schumaker, and Kevin Cullen, MD, University of Maryland Greenebaum Cancer Center, Baltimore; and Nicholas Sarlis, MD, PhD, sanofi-aventis, Bridgewater, NJ.

Editor’s Note: Marshall Posner, MD is director of Head and Neck Oncology at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, Boston, Massachusetts. The data in the current article is a subset of a larger trial, which was reported in 2007 in The New England Journal of Medicine. Volume 357:1705-1715.

Oral Cancers Much More Treatable
When Caused by Virus
MARSHALL POSNER, MD

The TV program Inside Edition featured a heartfelt message on September 2 for cancer patient Michael Douglas, from head and neck cancer survivor Denise DeSimone. For the television audience, DeSimone represented the many SPOHNC survivors who know exactly what the actor is going through. She is a 5-year survivor who was diagnosed with stage 4 throat cancer in 2005. And also just like Douglas, she had a tumor on the base of her tongue. Her doctors gave her 3 months to live.

“I have some advice and some love to share with him,” said DeSimone, who believes our culture makes a huge mistake in looking at “battling” cancer as opposed to embracing it.

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“I have some advice and some love to share with him,” said DeSimone, who believes our culture makes a huge mistake in looking at “battling” cancer as opposed to embracing it.

Inside Edition’s Les Trent asked, “What words of advice would you have for Michael Douglas?”

“It’s really important for him to take advantage of this time. It

TV Interview Features SPOHNC Survivor’s Heartfelt Message to Michael Douglas

INTERVIEW continued on page 2
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may allow him a time to settle down and come into a quiet space,” said DeSimone. Douglas had completed filming a new movie in the spring and was diagnosed this summer.

At airt ime, Douglas had just finished his first week of chemotherapy and radiation treatment with an immobilization face mask. “For someone who is claustrophobic, it can be pretty daunting. It’s challenging. It’s very scary and it’s very uncomfortable,” said DeSimone.

DeSimone said the actor may experience some more uncomfortable side effects. The 65-year-old Douglas is going on an 8-week course of chemotherapy and radiation in an effort to retain his voice or keep it from changing.

Trent asked her, “What might he be going through?”

“I lost my voice. My ability to sing, to speak. I wasn’t able to eat for many months. All of a sudden, he will lose all taste. He won’t be able to eat because it is like chewing on leather,” said DeSimone.

Two years after completing her treatment, DeSimone sang The National Anthem before 35,000 fans at Fenway Park field in Boston. She has also gone on to be ordained as an interfaith minister and speaker in 2009. This year she entertained fellow survivors at the SPOHNC Massachusetts Taste Event (see page 5).
FIRST ANNUAL SPOHNC TASTE EVENT SUCCESS
REACHES FROM COAST TO COAST

“A delightful evening that brought together the survivors and professionals and family who supported them. It was wonderful to see smiles throughout the room and the sharing of stories from a survival standpoint.” – Katherine Barrett B.A., GRN, M.S., Survivor

SPOHNC chapters from across the country including those in New York, Chicago, Boston, Kansas, Seattle, and Florida, hosted successful Taste Events in their communities during Oral and Head and Neck Cancer Awareness Week in April. Around 700 people flocked to the inaugural Taste Events held by 6 chapters from the Pacific to the Gulf and East Coasts. Building on these successes, S P O H N C announces the second annual “Taste Event” will take place in Spring 2011.

“The first annual taste events held this year were remarkable, and we want to raise awareness through this wonderful program to ensure that SPOHNC can continue to meet the needs of our community of oral and head and neck cancer survivors,” said Mary Ann Caputo, Executive Director of SPOHNC.

This year’s Taste Events attracted a top number of attendees, with one event moving into new quarters next year because the hall was filled to capacity with survivors, families and friends, including caregivers. The chapters’ facilitators said they had seen a fantastic turnout for the event with all attendance nearing capacity. Attendees at the Taste Events were able to enjoy appetizers, entrees, and desserts from 65 local restaurants, as well as sample foods from participating exhibitors and raffle items from contributing stores. There was also entertainment at some of the events.

SPOHNC founder Nancy Leupold said: “We’re delighted so many people participated in the SPOHNC Taste Event this year. It’s the first time that SPOHNC has managed a nationwide event. Our chapters worked closely with partners including chefs, healthcare professionals, local talent and businesses to create an event that individuals with eating challenges could enjoy.” The offerings from local restaurants, food purveyors, even musicians, were packed into the 5 days during Awareness Week. Attendees met the chefs, sampled a variety of signature soft dishes from area restaurants, and enjoyed music and entertainment as they strolled from table to table for a taste of each special dish created for head and neck cancer survivors.

Included in the participating chefs and bakers was none other than Michael Anthony, the head chef at the Gramercy Tavern in NYC, the restaurant rated by the Zagat Guide as the #1 eating establishment in New York City. Chef Michael’s connection to the Taste Event is twofold...he was mentioned in the inspiring article “A Man of Taste,” the story of Chef Grant Achatz, who like Michael’s father, is a survivor of oral and head and neck cancer. The New Yorker magazine reports that early in his treatment, when his tongue was swollen from the tumor, Chef Grant and his girlfriend went to Gramercy Tavern. They ate a 9-course meal of pasta and other “soft foods” prepared by chef Michael. The gesture was made in honor of Mr. Anthony’s father who also had tongue cancer.

Chapter Facilitator Mary Anne Macauley was honored as the Chairperson of SPOHNC’s first nationwide “Tasting Event.” Two years ago, she shared the article about Grant Achatz at a meeting of the chapter in Danvers. The article explained how Achatz fought against his lack of desire for food due to his loss of taste through his creative reliance on texture, smell, appearance, and memory. It served as inspiration for a dining experience for the Massachusetts chapter members, who proceeded to launch the first Taste Event for SPOHNC in 2009. As other chapters then joined in the Event, Dennis Staropoli, Stony Brook NY Chapter facilitator, also took on duties as a National Chairperson.

East Coast: Exceptional Events
The Syosset and Stony Brook Chapters on Long Island, NY, held their premier Tasting Event on the evening of April 14, one of the first events of the week. SPOHNC President and Founder and Nancy Leupold joined other survivors for the event, along with physicians and healthcare professionals from hospitals across Long Island.

Chef Michael Anthony also was there in person along with his sous chef to serve his delicious crepes. “It really worked out so nicely and we enjoyed sampling the delicious foods from all of the chefs. We loved watching the chef from Gramercy Tavern prepare the delicious crabmeat crepes. It was great having him there. There was such a sense of warmth and compassion in the room,” said survivor Debbie Cohn, who attended with her husband, Steve Cohn, M.D.

“Much planning and effort had gone into making this a memorable evening, but the event truly exceeded all of our expectations.” commented Dennis Caputo.

TASTE EVENT continued on page 4
SPOHNC Taste Event from page 3

Staropoli, who partnered in the event with Syosset Chapter Facilitator Christine Lantier, R.N. “The evening surely helped to raise the general awareness of these cancers and their profound effects on patients and their families. We are grateful to all who participated. Even though we had a large Knights of Columbus hall donated for the occasion, it was barely big enough to accommodate the overflow crowd of 100+...we’re already thinking about a larger venue for next year.”

SPOHNC Long Island is deeply grateful to these community partners in the Taste Event: Ayhan’s Restaurants, Fratelli Iavarone Cafe, Besito’s, The Brass Rail, Brian Scotts American Restaurant, Copenhagen Bakery, Culinary Sensations, Golden Dolphin Diner, Gramercy Tavern, Greek Village, New York City College of Technology, New Bakaliko, Novita, Pirandello, and Tim’s Shipwreck Diner.

On April 15, while procrastinators across the nation were preparing their taxes, 80 members of the SPOHNC-Rochester chapter enjoyed their evening of delicious treats and great experiences during the “Spring Fling Tasting Event” at the James P. Wilmot Cancer Center at the University of Rochester. The event also marked the Rochester SPOHNC Chapter’s fourth anniversary.

Otolaryngologist Dr. Paul Van der Sloot was the master of ceremonies, and he offered a brief overview of current approaches to oral, head and neck cancer and future treatment modalities. He also recognized the many chefs who created unique dishes for this event and the volunteers who made the event possible.

“It was a wonderful evening of camaraderie with families, friends and caregivers,” said Chapter Facilitator Sandra Sabatka. “There were many laughs, stories of successes shared, and of course delicious dishes donated by local restaurants including Jines Restaurant, Wilshire Restaurant, The Johnson House, Gatherings Catering Company, West Winds Café, D&R Depot, and the House of Six Nations. We even sampled some beverages donated by ISAGENIX and Mona Vie. Guests also received a gift bag with a variety of samples and support information.”

Leonard Borucki attended with his wife, Esther and said “We enjoyed not only the great food but also the friendliness of the staff and others who attended. It was a memorable evening that was enjoyed by all. Our thanks to the entire staff who made it possible.”

Midwest Mingling and Memories

This family-friendly atmosphere for the event also benefited oral and head and neck cancer survivors when NorthShore University Health System, University of Chicago, and Loyola Medical Center, as SPOHNC’s chapters in Illinois, joined forces and held their first annual Tasting Event at the local Gilda’s Club. Fifty survivors--their family members, and caregivers, nurses, social workers, coordinators, and physicians, such as Ezra Cohen, M.D. from University of Chicago and Arif Shaikh, M.D. from NorthShore--gathered to enjoy the variety of creative dishes of the chefs from nine distinctive restaurants. Pete Miller’s, Jamba Juice, Caffé Gelato, Cedars Mediterranean Kitchen, Kevl’s Restaurant, Salerno’s Pizza & Pasta, Racine Bakery & Deli, Bin 36, and Cheesecake Factory contributed.

“The chefs really rose to the occasion and created very inventive dishes that could be easily eaten by oral, head and neck cancer patients. With their overly generous donations, they were so pleased to lift the patients’ morale and make their eating a more satisfying experience and really ‘tackle’ their nutritional needs.

“We had various soups, pastas, desserts, and smoothies. Each dish was designed specifically for people with oral, head and neck cancer in mind. I was thrilled with the turnout of such a wide variety of options. Our location of the event was central in Chicago, with hopes to make it as convenient as possible for everyone to attend,” said Mary Herbert, University of Chicago Chapter Facilitator.

One of the truly dedicated and relentless patient advocate/survivor and planning committee member Geary Barnes shared his experience: “It was like being at a downtown restaurant. There were a lot of new survivors and caregivers to meet, which I really enjoyed. With multiple health care and hospital systems participating we survivors and caregivers were able to trade stories that provided insight which I found to be quite enlightening. The evening was mostly conversation and camaraderie.”

Every piece of food was consumed on the other hand. “The members of the group left very happy and showed such appreciation,” said Herbert. “One man informed me it was the first time, since he was diagnosed with cancer 3 years prior, that he went for a second helping of food.”

New England: A Dining, Not Just Tasting, Event

Creating a social and caring environment that celebrates more than just physical survival from oral and head and neck cancers is an important ingredient of the Massachusetts Taste Event. “Food is the basis of social interactions. Deprived of the ability to share meals with family and friends, oral taste event continues to rise.”
and head and neck cancer patients can experience a particular form of social isolation. The goal for this dining event was to create an opportunity that would allow patients to share a meal and good conversation once again,” said Mary Anne Macauley, L.C.S.W., who facilitates the North of Boston (Danvers) chapter of SPOHNC with Lisa Whelan, R.N., and Ann Marie Gennari, dietician.

Their group teamed up with the SPOHNC Boston chapter, facilitated by Valerie Goldstein, to host an event for 50 patients and their families.

Patients dined on crab cakes, angel hair pasta with chicken, Asian noodles, and cream puffs among other dishes. Theresa Shalsi, a head and neck cancer patient and professional cake decorator, contributed a sheet cake featuring the SPOHNC logo.

Denise DeSimone, another head and neck cancer survivor treated at the North Shore Cancer Center, entertained with her original songs. The evening ended with a wonderful magic act performed by Eric Dubois, the 11-year-old son of one of the Cancer Center’s staff members. The Massachusetts event proved to be a resounding success.

Participants included Woodman’s of Essex, Captain’s Waterfront, D’Orsis Bakery, Petriolo’s, The Grape Vine, Epicurean Feast, Henry’s Foods of Beverly, Kelley’s, Stoneyfield Farms, Trader Joe’s, and the chefs of the Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary.

Kansas City: Culinary and Community Outreach

Supporting outreach efforts such as community education and preventive screenings was another benefit of the Taste Events. Each Taste Event provided survivors with opportunities to hear from speakers on topics including advances in the treatment of head and neck cancer, therapies and protocols, and the latest research on addressing the side effects of treatment, including food-related issues among other subjects. Many local events distributed educational literature and made free screenings for oral and head and neck cancer available through their partnerships with medical centers and healthcare providers.

“The decision of the Kansas Chapter of SPOHNC was to call our tasting a community-awareness event and to have $10 tickets primarily to give an idea of how many would be attending. The University of Kansas Cancer Center agreed to allow us to use the atrium free of charge and to print the 1,000 fliers to promote the event,” said Chapter Facilitator Mary Moody, L.S.W.

“A local television newsman, Larry Moore, who is a 19-year head and neck cancer survivor spoke after his evening newscast. The chair of our ENT department, Dr. Doug Girod, also agreed to be a part of the welcome and to provide information on head and neck cancer.” Their decision certainly paid off. The Kansas Head and Neck Cancer Support Group expresses sincere appreciation to Hen House Stores (featuring Tippins Soups), Texas Roadhouse, Johnny’s Hickory House Bar-B-Q, Robeks Fruit Smoothies and Health Eats, Cinzetti’s Italian Feast, Unity Inn at Unity Village, Bob Evans Restaurants, Nestles Nutrition, The Art Institutes International of Kansas City, and The Roasterie.

Pacific Coast: Evening of Eating, Entertainment, and Learning

Like the Kansas Taste Event, Seattle’s Taste Event at Evergreen Hospital, was “a taste-and-learn evening for patients with oral, head and neck cancer, and their families,” said Kile Jackson, who is the Seattle Chapter Facilitator as well as a survivor, biomedical engineer, and singer.Area chefs presented delicious, nutritious dishes that could be swallowed easily. Fittingly, the kick-off Taste Event was titled “Nibbles and Noshes.”

Those participating included Renatto Medranda, executive chef at the Westin Hotel in Bellevue; Shane Lynch, executive chef at Evergreen; Sandra Watson, pastry chef at Trellis Restaurant at the Heathman Hotel in Kirkland; and Mihael Lomardi, executive suites chef at Qwest Field in Seattle. More than 75 head and neck patients and survivors were served.
TASTE EVENT from page 5

attended the event.

Entertainment at the event was courtesy of Jackson and his musical friends. Joining Jackson for this SPOHNC inaugural event was band member Tim Lerch and legendary harmonica player, Lee Oskar, a founding member of the Super group WAR.

“SPOHNC has been a lifesaver for me,” said Jackson. “I was able to get nutritional information about foods I could prepare that would be easy to swallow and learn about various products and how others were dealing with the disease.”

Gulf Coast: Challenging Creations

“Many of the SPOHNC Taste Event participants are also patients who [are treated for] swallowing problems post head and neck cancer,” says Karen Moss, a Speech Pathologist who facilitates the SPOHNC chapter in Naples, Florida. “Some of these patients can’t eat or drink anything by mouth without the risk of aspiration. These survivors fight a lack of desire for nutrition brought about by the struggles of loss of taste and difficulty chewing and swallowing food. They focus on experience, memory, and visual cues to initiate eating.”

For the Taste Event, “the challenge was to employ these same tools while creating dishes that can be enjoyed by patients recovering from head and neck cancer,” she said. “Yet three local restaurants took up our unique culinary challenge: to address the nutritional needs of our head and neck cancer patients who struggle with issues of dry mouth, difficulty swallowing, and loss of taste—all side effects of radiation therapy and surgical intervention.”

“I had done my homework in explaining to the chefs exactly what they could or could not eat,” said Moss, describing her own challenges with event planning and execution. “I scanned the room again and again, searching for watery eyes, coughs, throat clearings. In the end, I was ecstatic. Everyone tried and succeeded with swallowing. Some brought home leftovers!”

Special thanks to Sunburst Café of Naples, Cosmo’s Pizzeria and Café of Naples, and Capt. Brien’s Seafood and Raw Bar of Marco Island who participated in the Naples Taste Event. These restaurants worked so hard to create delicious meals that everyone could try.

SPOHNC is deeply grateful to all those community partners and chapter committees who invested their time and talents in improving the lives of the survivors we serve. Leftover from the 2010 Taste Events are wonderful eating experiences, congenial memories, survival celebrations, and heightened community awareness of oral and head and neck cancer. For more information about the 2011 SPOHNC Taste Event and how your support group or restaurant can participate in this event next year, please visit www.spohnc.org or call your local chapter.

Editor’s Note: SPOHNC would like to thank all of those individuals who contributed to this article and who worked with great energy and dedication to put together the successful launch of the first annual Taste Events in 2010. Our appreciation goes to the following SPOHNC Chapter Facilitators who served as authors for this article:

Dorothy Austin, RN, OCN
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Dennis Staropoli
BOOK REVIEW

Karen T. Pitman, MD, Section Editor

MEETING THE CHALLENGES OF ORAL AND HEAD AND NECK CANCER, A SURVIVOR’S GUIDE


A Survivor’s Guide is the result of an ambitious project of the founders of the group Support for People with Oral and Head and Neck Cancer, Inc. (SPOHNC). It is a compilation of chapters contributed by various professionals, encompassing a large spectrum of issues in head and neck cancer, from basic anatomy to dealing with insurance claims, and everything in between.

Because it is directed primarily to the survivors, the book does not address end-of-life issues, but otherwise certainly fulfills its description as having something for everyone. As I reviewed this book, I could not help but to respond to each chapter with thoughts of how my head and neck cancer patients and their families would react to, or benefit from, this information. I also saw it with the eyes of 30 years’ experience in general otolaryngology, but also mindful of my students and primary care colleagues.

Providers, nurses, speech and language pathologists, and their students would certainly find the chapters on anatomy, treatment planning, radiation, and chemotherapy an excellent overview of the disease, while many of my patients or their families might find some of this information a bit technical or overwhelming. The chapters covering targeted therapy, swallowing, communications, dental care, and nutrition should be a must-read for every patient as well as for those people involved in their care. There is also includes a practical guide to clinical trials, with an extensive source list to access clinical trials information.

A rare find was the inclusion of financial topics. Paying for head and neck cancer care is sometimes an afterthought, yet can be just as ruinous as the disease itself. This book addresses how to deal with U.S. health insurance, fight for medically necessary dental care, and apply for disability benefits. Patient rights and disability regulations are well delineated and crystal clear here.

Perhaps the chapter most useful to all readers is the one entitled “Products, Therapies, and Survivor Input: Resources for Coping with the Challenges of Side Effects of Treatment.” It is full of lists of items that soothe dry mouth, mucositis, trismus, pain, and many other problems associated with treatment, as well as product sources. The authors have also included a generous list of resources, support groups, and websites for additional information. This alone is worth the price of the book, and reveals the broad expertise and intense devotion of these authors to improve the daily lives of head and neck cancer patients.

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Oncologists from around the world gathered in Chicago in June to review the latest scientific data, examine new technologies, and exchange clinical insights with their colleagues from the American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO). The ASCO Annual Meeting is viewed as the premier event in the oncology community. The research and education presented at ASCO meetings enhance oncologists’ knowledge, thereby advancing high-quality patient care. Below are some of the research highlights that suggest future treatments of oral and head and neck cancer patients reported at the 2010 annual meeting of ASCO.

**Tobacco Smoking Linked to Prediction of Survival Rates for Oropharyngeal Cancer Patients**

The presence of human papilloma virus (HPV) in head and neck tumors is the most important predictor of survival for people with oral cancer (see page 1). The second leading predictor of survival is now confirmed to be a lifetime smoking history. Researchers have found that tobacco smoking is associated with poorer survival for patients, and the risk of death and cancer progression increases by 1% for each pack-year of tobacco smoking.

Oropharyngeal cancer patients with HPV-positive tumors who were never- or light- smokers had a survival rate about 25% higher at 3 years than patients on the study with HPV-positive tumors who were smokers. For patients with HPV-negative tumors who were smokers the difference in survival was close to 40% lower after 3 years.

Historical data from institutions around the country served as the basis for the new findings. Utilizing specimens collected at the time of patient entry into a previous multi-institutional clinical study, investigators were able to analyze oropharyngeal tumors. The researchers were able to classify the patients as having a low, intermediate, or high risk of death based on four factors: HPV status, pack-years of tobacco smoking, tumor stage, and lymph node stage.

The new data, from a subsequent study presented at this year’s ASCO meeting, confirms the correlation of HPV status and pack-years of tobacco smoking to survival. In a randomized phase III study of 1068 head and neck patients enrolled over 7 years, the investigators found that HPV status and tobacco pack-years were independent and important predictors of patient survival.

The findings hint at the possibility that a smoking history and the HPV status of a tumor may be used in the future, in addition to cancer stage, to determine the aggressiveness of a patient’s therapy.


Ang K, Zhang Q, Wheeler R. A phase III trial (RTOG 0129) of two radiation-cisplatin regimens for head and neck carcinomas (HNC): Impact of radiation and cisplatin intensity on outcome. University of Texas M. D. Anderson Cancer Center, Houston, TX; RTOG Statistical Center, Philadelphia, PA; Huntsman Cancer Institute, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT; Centre Hospitalier de l’Universite de Montreal, Montreal, QC, Canada; Karmanos Cancer Institute, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI; Thomas Jefferson University, Philadelphia, PA; University of Louisville, Louisville, KY. ASCO Abstract #5507. Available at http://abstract.asco.org/AbstView_74_41254.html.

Gillison ML, Ang K, Fu K. Analysis of the effect of p16 and tobacco pack-years (p-y) on overall (OS) and progression-free survival (PFS) for patients with oropharynx cancer (OPC) in Radiation Therapy Oncology Group. The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH; RTOG Statistical Center, Philadelphia, PA; University of Texas M. D. Anderson Cancer Center, Houston, TX; University of California, San Francisco, San Francisco, CA; LDS Hospital, Salt Lake, UT; H. Lee Moffitt Cancer Center & Research Institute, Tampa, FL; University of Alabama at Birmingham, Birmingham, AL; SUNY Health Science Center, Brooklyn, NY; Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN. ASCO Abstract # 5510. Available at http://abstract.asco.org/AbstView_74_42843.html.

**New Regimen Shows Favorable Response Rate in Advanced Head and Neck Cancer**

A novel two-agent regimen was efficacious in squamous cell head and neck cancer that had recurred or metastasized in patients at the University of Pittsburgh.

The combination of pemetrexed (Alimta) and bevacizumab (Avastin) yielded a response rate of 30% in 40 patients enrolled in a small, single-arm trial, according to Athanassios Argrinis, MD. Bevacizumab is a monoclonal antibody that targets a hormone, called vascular epithelial growth factor (VEGF), which is found in squamous cell head and neck cancer. High levels of VEGF correlate with poor outcome, he noted. Patients were also given folic acid and vitamin B12.

This combination also increased the length of time before patients’ cancers progressed by more than half a year, and it extended their overall survival. The researchers also isolated DNA from 28 patients to see how genetic variations played a role in survival and if treatments could be tailored for individual patients.

Their analysis showed:
- Two patients had a complete response and 11 had a partial response.
- Twenty-one patients had stable disease for a disease control rate of 86%.
- The time to progression was 4.9 months and median overall survival was 11.5 months.

Larger -- and randomized -- trials are needed to define the extent of any benefit of this combination, and one such trial (Eastern Cooperative Oncology Group 13056) is under way.

Source reference:
Available at http://abstract.asco.org/AbstView_74_42843.html.

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Membership includes subscription to eight issues of News From SPOHNC.