The Pervasive Crisis of Diminishing Radiotherapy Access for American Indians in the United States

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BACKGROUND

- American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) cancer patients disproportionally present with more advanced stages of disease and have the worst cancer-specific survival rates of any racial/ethnic group in the United States. (Howlader et al., SEER Cancer Statistics Review 2015; White et al., American Journal of Public Health 2014; American Cancer Society 2016)

- Over a recent 20-year period (1990-2009), overall cancer death rates for ALs linearly increased, while at the same time linearly decreased for Caucasians (American Indian Cancer Burden: Cancer Facts for American Indians and Alaska Natives 2016)

- Cancer is the second leading cause of death among AI/ANs nationwide, in which they disproportionately present with more advanced stages of disease. (Petereit et al., Journal of Clinical Oncology 2004; Guadagnolo et al., Public Health Reports 2009)

- The presence of disparities in radiotherapy (RT) access for AI/AN patients has rarely been examined.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

- To accurately assess the literature regarding disparities in RT access for AI/AN patients, a comprehensive search of the PubMed database (pubmed.gov) was made for articles up to and including April 20, 2017

- Search terms used were “Native American”, “American Indians”, “radiotherapy”, and “disparities” in combination

RESULTS

- The literature describing access disparities for AI/AN is sparse, revealing only three studies

- Each study described initiatives from the Walking Forward program, the National Cancer Institute Cancer Disparity Research Partnership initiative to address AI/AN barriers to cancer screening among AP populations in the Northern Plains region

- This program has utilized patient navigation, community education and access to clinical trials for over 4,000 AI/AN patients to combat high cancer mortality rates, and over the course of its fifteen years in existence, has resulted in patients presenting with earlier stages of disease and higher cure rates.

- Lung cancer, the most common cause of cancer-related mortality in AI/AN patients is the most recent and ongoing focus of the program.

CONCLUSIONS

- The amount of information regarding RT access in American Indians is limited.

- Nearly all peer-reviewed published progress in this area is associated with the Walking Forward program.

- Further initiatives from this program will hopefully inspire similar initiatives throughout the country in order to reduce the barriers to optimized cancer care that these patients face.

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