Improving the quality of care for children with brain tumours in South Africa: A report from the 4th Paediatric Brain Tumour Workshop

The 4th annual Paediatric Brain Tumour Workshop was held on 16 and 17 November 2013 at the University of Cape Town (UCT), South Africa (SA). The focus of this workshop was the management of children with brain tumours in limited-resource settings.

Although brain tumours are the second-most common cancer in children, brain tumour awareness among the SA public and its physicians is low, with few centres being adequately equipped to manage affected children or having functioning multidisciplinary teams (MDTs). Currently, there are no national protocols or consensus agreements on how best to manage childhood brain tumours in SA.

In an attempt to address these issues, a series of educational workshops over the last few years has aimed to bring together SA health professionals treating children with brain tumours. International and local experts provide information and insights on a variety of pertinent topics, and attendees are invited to discuss clinical cases.

At the 4th workshop, three international guest speakers as well as several local experts were invited to give lectures. Delegates were encouraged to present case vignettes for discussion at the meeting.

Meeting highlights

Richard Hewlett is a local neuropathology expert, qualified in neuro-radiology. He gave an excellent review of the history of paediatric neuro-oncology, and walked delegates through the varying imaging and pathological features of indolent astrocytoma. Unfortunately many of these tumours fail to fit neatly into existing categories, and subtle findings may help to predict prognosis and guide treatment.

Michelle Carrihll is a local paediatric endocrinologist who has attended the multidisciplinary paediatric neuroendocrine clinic at Groote Schuur Hospital for many years. She presented a talk on the neurosurgical management of craniopharyngioma, one of the most difficult problems facing a paediatric neuro-oncology MDT.

Mariana Kruger, Head of Paediatrics at Tygerberg Hospital and the University of Stellenbosch, gave a lecture on the ethical treatment of children with brain tumours in a limited-resource setting. MDTs face many dilemmas and she provided some of the tools that physicians can use when making difficult management decisions.

The last lecture of the workshop was given by Michelle Meiring, a paediatric palliative care specialist. She gave insights and suggestions into the palliation and end-of-life care for children with progressive and incurable brain tumours.

The Best Speaker award for the clinical vignettes went to Jennifer Geel from Charlotte Maxeke Academic Hospital in Johannesburg, who presented an unusual case of an atypical teratoid rhabdoid tumour of the orbit in a child.

It was clear that formulation of local protocols is an essential next step, and this was considered a priority of the SA Children’s Cancer Study Group (SACCGS). The current chairman of SACCGS, Monica Vaithilinghum, was present at the workshop. It was noted that international best practice may not be applicable in countries with limited resources, and local audits are essential to understand our disease patterns and responses to treatment.

The best results for paediatric brain tumour patients are obtained with multidisciplinary collaboration, and all referral centres should aim to achieve this. Teleconferencing with a more experienced team could be important in decision-making in limited-resource areas.

Meeting conclusions

Feedback showed that delegates found the meeting very interesting and they received information that would influence clinical practice.

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S Afr J CH 2014;8(2):44. DOI:10.7196/SAJCH.746

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