

A critical evaluation of oncology presentations to the emergency department: a retrospective cross-sectional study

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Introduction: The study analysed the trends and characteristics of adult haematology and oncology patients presenting to a tertiary referral emergency department (ED) in New South Wales. The demand on Australian ED's has increased 4.2% over 4 years and the cancer rate has doubled in size since 1991. A critical evaluation of the patients presenting to the ED will facilitate the development of new models of care.

Aim: The study explored adult ED medical oncology and haematology patient presentations.

Methods: A 12 month medical record audit was conducted of ED presentations. A randomized sample was then selected of these patients (n=290).

Results: In 2012, the ED annual presentation rate was 62919 with adult presentations (n=47164:75%) and gender split evenly across both groups (Females n=24048:51%). The overall presentation rate for haematology and oncology patients was 1110 (2.4%). A random sample included 290 medical records of which the majority were oncology (255:93.6%). The average age was 65.3 years and the majority of patients arrived by private transport 183 (63%).

The three most common symptoms on presentation were fever (n=54:18.6%), abdominal pain (n=34:11.7%), and shortness of breath (n=32:11%). There were 96 (33.1%) patients that received chemotherapy within one week of presentation. The majority of patients were allocated a Triage Category 2 (n=94:32.4%) or Triage Category 3 (n=131:45.2%).

The average time for nurse initiated interventions was 25minutes and the average time to analgesia was 30.8minutes. The majority of patients were admitted to a hospital ward bed 270 (93%). Of the presentations 36.21% died within the 12 months.

Conclusion: The study has shown that while haematology and oncology patients are only a small percentage of total ED presentations the vast majority are allocated high triage codes, have high admission rates and high mortality rates.