Correlation between Visual Analog Scale and Patient Health Questionnaire-9 among Breast Cancer Patient at Islamic Hospital of Malahayati Medan

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Abstract

BACKGROUND: The World Health Organization reported that in 2018, the most prevalent cancer cases in Indonesia is breast cancer with a total of 58,256 cases (16.7%) from total cancer cases in Indonesia. Among cancer patients, pain is the most profound and definite effect that has been linked to reduced quality of life as well as the development of depression. In Indonesia, studies investigating the effect of pain among breast cancer patient with depression are still lacking.

AIM: The aim of this study is to investigate the effect of pain with depression among breast cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy at Islamic Hospital of Malahayati Medan.

METHODS: Methods applied in this study were cross-sectional numerical correlative study involved 35 breast cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy at Islamic Hospital of Malahayati Medan age 40–60 years old. To assess pain, we used the visual analog scale (VAS), and as for depression, patient health questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9) was employed. Pearson correlation test was used to assess the correlation between pain and depression.

RESULTS: The results showed that most of our subjects graduated from university, are already married and employed. Most are already at the third stadium with VAS score of around 4.89 ± 1.530 indicating moderate pain and PHQ-9 score of 8.23 ± 3.456 indicating mild depression. Pearson test showed r = 0.511 (mild strength) indicating that pain severity is correlated positively to depression severity.

CONCLUSION: There is a correlation between VAS score and PHQ-9 score among breast cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy at Islamic Hospital of Malahayati Medan.

Introduction

Breast cancer is known as the leading cause of death among women worldwide, affecting more than 1½ million women from all over the world [1]. It was reported by the World Health Organization that the most prevalent cancer cases in Indonesia are breast cancer with a total of 58,256 cases (16.7%) from total cancer cases in Indonesia. In North Sumatera province, 856 cases of breast cancer were found in 2019 which is the highest number in Indonesia [2]. Earlier studies have shown that pain suffered from cancer has been linked to mood disorders, such as depression, as well as other disorders, including anxiety and somatization. A study by Derogatis et al. showed that higher number of cancer patients who are also diagnosed with existing psychiatric disorders experienced severe pain (39%) compared to 19% who are not diagnosed with any psychiatry disorders [3]. Cancer-related pain has been associated with lower quality of life. This also depends on to what extent the individuals internalize and believe that the pain they suffer is able to alter their daily life which is related to the severity of depression [4]. Thus, our study aims to explore the correlation between pain and depression among women with breast cancer.

Methods

This cross-sectional numerical correlative study took place at the chemotherapy room of Islamic Hospital of Malahayati Medan in November until December 2020. Sample was gathered consecutively using inclusion and exclusion criteria. Our inclusion criteria are as follows: (1) age of 40–60 years old, (2) breast cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy, (3) diagnosed with third stadium breast cancer, and (4) are willing to participate in the study. Patients who are already diagnosed with psychiatry disorders or those with other existing condition causing pain, including migraine, arthritis, and gout are excluded from the study. A total of 35 breast cancer patient were involved in this study. Subjects
were given informed consent before the study and were requested to fill in personal data on participant’s form. Direct interview was carried out in accordance with COVID-19 health protocol.

**Measurement**

**Visual analog scale (VAS)**

VAS was used to assess intensity of pain in adults, consisting of a 10 cm horizontal line representing the intensity of pain from 0 to 10. Patients are requested to self-mark the number on the scale with pencil in accordance to the pain they experience [5]. VAS score interpretation is in the following:

- 0: No pain
- 1–3: Mild pain, including tingling sensation, itchy
- 4–6: Moderate pain, including numbness
- 7–9: Severe pain that can still be controlled by patient
- 10: Severe pain that can no longer be controlled by patient [6].

Figure 1 is an example of VAS that was used in this study.

**Patient health questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9)**

PHQ-9 consists of nine question items which are designed to be in accordance with the 4th Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders criteria of depression. Patients are required to self-report how often that the symptoms present. Score of 0 indicates that the symptoms never happen, 1 means that it appears only a few days, 2 means the symptoms appear to be more than half the days, and 3 indicates that the symptoms appear daily. PHQ-9 score has sensitivity of 88% and specificity 88%. Total score of 5–9 shows mild depression, 10–14 shows moderate depression, 15–19 means nearly severe depression, and 20–27 indicates severe depression [7].

**Statistical analysis**

We chose to use Shapiro–Wilk test to assess the normality of the data as our sample is quite small of only 35 subjects (n < 50). To assess the correlation between VAS and PHQ-9 score, we used Pearson correlation test as both of our variables are numeric and data distribution was found normal.

**Results**

As shown in Table 1, average age of our subjects was 49.60 ± 5.957. Most of them were graduated from university (n = 15, 42.9%) and are married (n = 26, 74.3%). More than half of the subjects are still employed (n = 19, 54.3%) and are diagnosed with third stadium breast cancer (n = 26, 74.3%).

**Table 1: Demographical characteristics of the subjects**

| Variables         | Value (n = 35) | Mean ± S.D | n (%) |
|-------------------|---------------|------------|-------|
| Age (year)        | 49.60 ± 5.957 |            |       |
| Education         |               |            |       |
| Junior high school| 8 (22.9)      |            |       |
| Senior high school| 12 (34.3)     |            |       |
| University        | 15 (42.9)     |            |       |
| Marital status    |               |            |       |
| Married           | 26 (74.3)     |            |       |
| Not married       | 9 (25.7)      |            |       |
| Employment        |               |            |       |
| Yes               | 19 (54.3)     |            |       |
| No                | 16 (45.7)     |            |       |
| Stadium           |               |            |       |
| III               | 26 (74.3)     |            |       |
| IV                | 9 (25.7)      |            |       |

We found that average VAS score reported by our subjects was 4.89 ± 1.530 indicating moderate pain (Table 2).

**Table 2: VAS score**

| Variable | n   | Mean ± S.D |
|----------|-----|------------|
| VAS      | 35  | 4.89 ± 1.530 |

VAS: Visual analog scale.

We also found that average PHQ-9 score of the subjects was 8.23 ± 3.456 indicating mild depression (Table 3).

**Table 3: PHQ-9 score**

| Variable | n   | Mean ± S.D |
|----------|-----|------------|
| PHQ-9    | 35  | 8.23 ± 3.456 |

PHQ: Patient health questionnaire.

Pearson correlation test showed that there is a significant positive moderate strength correlation between pain intensity and depression severity (r = 0.511, p = 0.002) (Table 4).

**Table 4: Pearson correlation test of VAS and PHQ-9 score**

| Variable | mean ± (S.D) | r   | p   |
|----------|--------------|-----|-----|
| VAS      | 4.89 ± 1.530 | 0.511| 0.002|
| PHQ-9    | 8.23 ± 3.456 |     |     |

VAS: Visual analog scale, PHQ: Patient health questionnaire.

**Discussion**

Cancer-related pain causes deliberating effect that leads to impaired overall quality of life. Despite the numerous innovations in cancer treatment, studies showed that pain has not been
completely resolved yet. In cancer patient, pain may chronically remain which no longer is responsive to certain painkillers. Many of cancer patients can actually be cancer free, but does not directly mean that they will be pain free. This has led to mood disorder, including depression, which sometimes coexists with somatic symptoms [8].

In our study, average age of the subjects is similar to earlier study from Bredal et al. that studied about pain among breast cancer patients involving 127 patients with average age of 45 years old. They found that breast cancer patients who are 45 years old are most likely to experience pain (OR: 3.52; 95% CI 1.84–6.73 and p = 0.0001) [9]. Same educational level among our subjects is also in line with a study from Lueboonthavatchai in 2007 [10]. Other study also showed similar result of depression severity, as shown in a study by Korzon et al. involving 53 breast cancer patients. In their study, they used BPI and HADS-D instead of PHQ-9, yet they also found that mild depression is most prevalent among the patients [11].

Chronic pain is defined as persistent pain that exists for more than three months. It is categorized as nociceptor or neuropathic pain which may coexist in cancer-related pain. Advanced breast cancer usually has already reached other target organs, known as metastasis, that often result in pressure throughout nerve ending, causing pain. In breast cancer, inflammatory cytokines, such as interleukin (IL)-6, IL-1β, and TNF-α, are increased, thus modulating peripheral nerve ending, producing intense chronic pain. It is also shown to have effect on hippocampus which leads to altered mood through the hypothalamic-hypophyseal-adrenocortical axis. This leads to increased monoamine reuptake that induces depression [12].

## Conclusion

There is a correlation between VAS score and PHQ-9 score among breast cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy at Islamic Hospital of Malahayati Medan. Therefore, awareness and early intervention is strongly encouraged.

## Declarations

### Authors’ contributions

All authors contributed equally to this work.

## Acknowledgments

The authors express their gratitude to Adam Malik General Hospital, Department of Psychiatry, Faculty of Medicine, Universitas Sumatera Utara, Indonesia, and all the participants of this study.

## Ethics approval and consent to participate

The Research Ethics Committee approved this study at the Faculty of Medicine, Universitas Sumatera Utara, with the letter number 650/KEP/USU/2021 on November 24, 2020. All participants write and sign a consent to participate before attending this study. Data will not be shared to respect the privacy of the participant.

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