

## *Disease Pattern in India*

# **Multiple Myeloma - A 'Cancer' which can be Easily Missed by Family Physicians**

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**G**Ps think that mammography and pap smear of the cervix are good enough to 'exclude' cancer in a female patient. Yes, and now with the help of modern imaging techniques including upper and lower GI endoscopy it is difficult to miss a cancer. Also doctors are lucky to have blood tests of tumour markers available to pick up cancer of various organs. And now PET C.T scan can pick up any suspicious area of cancer (at a cost of Rs. 16000 to 18000/-).

But, still the most important step to exclude a cancer is good medical examination. A good example is to detect an ulcer in the buccal mucosa in a tobacco chewer, which on biopsy turns out to be a cancer.

I am writing this article to diagnose a cancer known as 'multiple myeloma'. It is a cancer of plasma cells of bone marrow. Although in the initial years of my practice, I missed this cancer in 3-4 patients, in the last few years, I have possibly not missed any, but have even picked up 'smouldering' multiple myeloma, where it has not developed to a stage when treatment has to be started - I am still on the look out to see if I miss any case. The difficulty of diagnosing this blood marrow cancer is that

1. Unlike leukaemias, cancer cells (myeloma) are not seen in the CBC and routine blood smears.
2. Imaging of bone scan (Isotope nuclear) can miss and may not pick up these bone

lesions of plasma cell cancers, (occasionally lateral view of X-ray skull can show punched out areas)

3. There are no special clinical features - to suspect multiple myeloma.

My suggestions are as follow :

1. In any patient with vague multiple complaints, who looks sick - rule out multiple myeloma.

Suspicion should increase

- i. If this patient has anaemia for no obvious cause,
- ii. If ESR is elevated with no obvious cause (including HIV) even on routine investigations,
- iii. If in SMA 12 reports, serum globulins are increased.

Under these circumstances, ask for blood test of serum protein immuno-electrophoresis to look for "monoclonal band".

Also a few laboratories do the urine test for Bence Jones proteins – which is very "helpful" in the diagnosis of Multiple myeloma.

Finally, ask for immuno fixation electrophoresis of serum protein, serum immunoglobulins and a marrow smear, which will clinch the diagnosis.

If diagnosed in time, many patients like ex-Prime Minister VP Singh can live a number of years of good life inspite of having cancer. Our leading consulting physician of Mumbai recently died of Multiple Myeloma within two years in spite of the best medication.

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