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Caregiver Thought Leader Interview: Dr. Narinder Bhalla • January 20, 2016

EDITOR'S PEN

Gary Barg, Editor-in-Chief

Caregiver Thought Leader Interview: Narinder Bhalla, MD

Senior Medical Director, Cardiovascular, AstraZeneca

Gary Barg: Dr. Bhalla, there were over 550,000 heart attacks this year in the United States alone, and I think over 200,000 of those were recurrent or repeat heart attacks. What should people who have had heart attacks and their caregivers be thinking about after a heart attack to make sure another one does not occur?

Dr. Bhalla: There are so many things after a heart attack that patients, caregivers and the families involved in the care should be thinking about from the standpoint of preventing another heart attack. Part of it is to understand why the first one occurred. From a lifestyle modification standpoint – diet, exercise, getting an ideal body weight, getting your cholesterol under control – those things are all the same but the targets change dramatically. Unfortunately, more than one-third of patients find out for the first time that they have heart disease when they have a heart attack.

We need to explain that a cholesterol level that may have been okay when they were in a screening population may now not be okay, because they have had an event. Sometimes they are going to be put on new medications, and the better understanding they have about these medications, the better they will be at taking them.

Gary Barg: Absolutely. It needs to be a partnership between the medical professional, the family caregiver, and the person who has had the heart attack, if possible.

Dr. Bhalla: It is also the healthcare team and that could be the doctors, nurses and even front office staff. All of these people are involved in interfacing with this patient and caregiver, so they all have to be on the same page on what the management strategy might be.

Gary Barg: There has been a lot of buzz lately about long-term dual antiplatelet therapy, which is a mouthful. Can you explain to a layperson like me what this is and how it can help someone who has had a heart attack?

Dr. Bhalla: Over time, we recognized that preventing subsequent events requires, in some ways, an upgrade from the aspirin standard. In fact, combining two agents may actually be more beneficial. We treat patient's cholesterol levels and do a lot of other things to help such as – exercise, diet, and smoking cessation – all that goes without saying. Yet, despite those efforts, we are still seeing recurrent events, so adding a medication like **Brilinta** along with aspirin may help prevent recurrent events. That is where the dual, antiplatelet terminology comes in. It is actually getting two medications that block the platelet, and in this case, by two very different mechanisms.

Gary Barg: People who have just had heart attacks are feeling a wide range of emotions, maybe not even common to them: fear, depression, loneliness and anger and that can be shocking to a family caregiver. What do you want to tell the caregivers about the potential for emotional upheaval with their loved ones who just had heart attacks?

Dr. Bhalla: From a caregiver's standpoint, I think you have to be ready because I cannot tell you exactly when these emotions might come out. I would advise caregivers to rely on the healthcare team to help you because frankly, it can be a lot for the caregiver, as well. Recognize that you want to be a good listener and sounding board and be optimistic, making sure the patient is going in the right direction, but, don't forget that it takes an emotional toll on you as the caregiver, as well. That is where I think the healthcare team can come in and be helpful in maybe decompressing that a little bit for the caregiver.

Gary Barg: Can you just describe some of the resources available to help manage life after a heart attack?

Dr. Bhalla: The American Heart Association has various websites and things that you can explore. I think your site, caregiver.com, is fantastic, because it

really addresses these issues head-on, gives good advice and refers people to the right places. We at AstraZeneca, offer many patient programs, including the [Brilinta Patient Support Service](#). It is a multidimensional program designed to help with issues such as, how and where I can get my medication and what is my insurance going to be, etc. Some of those things that can hamper adherence to medications. The patient support system helps guide you through those hurdles. Then it morphs into a coaching and sounding board program, where you have patients become more educated about their disease process, their risk factors and helping them understand what the future looks like.

Gary Barg: What kind of prevention advice do you have for family caregivers?

Dr. Bhalla: That is a good question and I will tell you that when I was in practice we would see a caregiver come in and talk about the patient, but then the conversation changes towards, the caregiver wanting to know, “Well, what can I do? Because I am now dealing with this. I have not had an event. How do I prevent myself from having it?” We would go through the same lifestyle things, maybe to a little bit of different degree; assess numerous factors and talk about what their personal risk factors are and how they should be managing them. Frankly, nothing gets done better than when there are multiple people involved in the effort. If I have the patient who is ready to quit smoking, but they have someone at home who is still smoking; guess what? It is not going to work. You can use that relationship between the caregiver and the patient to help both of them progress through the journey: For the patient, avoiding a recurrent event and for the caregiver, avoiding their first event.

Gary Barg: If you only had one piece of advice to give a family caregiver, what would that be?

Dr. Bhalla: Stay engaged. Just because you are six or ten months out of a heart attack and your loved one has done well, do not become disengaged thinking, “Oh, things are going well. We can kind of loosen the reins a little bit.” I think you always want to stay vigilant and engaged. And I do not mean that in a negative way, as in, something is definitely going to happen, but in a more engaged way and then there is less of a chance that the other shoe will drop.

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