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Eating-related disorders in patients with advanced cancer

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This work was presented at a workshop entitled: “To eat or not to eat, that is the question,” held 24–25 October 2001, at the 4th San Salvatore Meeting on Palliative Care, Lugano and St. Gallen, Switzerland (Congress Chairman Hans Neuenschwander, M.D.). The presentation was given by Florian Strasser, with feedback from an expert panel consisting of Carla Ripamonti (Divisione Terapia del Dolore e Cure Palliative, Istituto Nazionale dei Tumori, Milan, Italy) and John Ellershaw (Marie Curie Centre Liverpool, Liverpool, UK). Conflict of interest: Florian Strasser is a consultant for the non-profit-making organization Society for Oncological and Immunological Research, Berlin

Abstract Patients with advanced incurable illnesses and their families are frequently concerned about not eating enough and a decline in physical functioning. Eating-related disorders were reviewed for a workshop at the 4th San Salvatore Meeting on Palliative Care in Switzerland, with the purpose of discussing new findings relating to the understanding and treatment of such problems. The topics discussed were patient and family concerns, practical nutritional advice, mechanism and causes of anorexia/cachexia, and assessment and management of eating-related disorders.

Keywords Anorexia/cachexia · Weight loss · Nutrition

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Introduction

Patients with advanced, incurable illnesses often express concerns about not eating enough as a reaction to decreased appetite and weight loss. Declining performance status and fatigue in these patients may cause family members intuitively to cook and provide more food of the right type for the patient. These efforts of family members on behalf of their loved ones may increase the

distress, since it is often not possible for the patients to increase their oral intake.

As palliative health care professionals we are challenged to inform patients and families about the causes of and treatment options for eating-related disorders. The purpose of this workshop was to discuss new findings that might help us in understanding and treating these disorders, with a focus on anorexia/cachexia, in patients with advanced incurable cancer.