

Primum Non Nocere and Neurosurgical Management of Brain Tumors

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Primum non nocere is a latin expression that means, "First do no harm." This phrase is most often mentioned when a certain 'therapeutic' intervention (so common these days with the availability of diagnostic as well as therapeutic armamentaria) is likely to have more harmful effects than benefits and is central to medical education. It remains a potent reminder that every decision regarding a patient's care carries the potential for harm. Commonly used in the late 1800s into the early decades of the 1900s, it was nearly exclusively transmitted orally, appearing rarely in the print only in the early 20th century. Though the exact origin of this phrase is uncertain, most believe that this was first described as a Latin paraphrase by Galen of a Hippocratic aphorism. In the Hippocratic Corpus (*Epidemics, BK I, Section XI*), it has actually been written as, "Declare the past, diagnose the present, foretell the future; practice these acts. As to diseases, make a habit of two things — to help, or at least to do no harm."

Smith, in his recent article has summarized the origin and uses and controversies of Primum non nocere.⁵ The article also reviews the various uses of the now popular aphorism, and its limitations as a moral injunction. With recognition of medical injuries as the leading cause of death and patient safety as a critical area for improvement in the US,⁴ the use of this expression has become very common and relevant and it has found its use in every medical subspecialty.

Primum non nocere is central in the surgical management of brain tumors, especially the 'high grade' ones. So far overwhelming evidence suggests that surgery has very little to do in the management of brain tumors except for obtaining a histological diagnosis and occasionally for decreasing the mass effect temporarily.^{1,3} Still craniotomy is one of the commonly performed surgeries by neurosurgeons all over the world with associated morbidity and mortality. Aren't neurosurgeons aware of primum non nocere? In this issue of the Nepal Journal of Neuroscience, Eguchi, et al., discuss

the different aspects of management of brain tumors.² Arguably conventional radiation therapy or gamma knife surgery have very little morbidity and mortality and outcome is also favourable. Eguchi and colleagues, in the careful follow up of seven patients with large pituitary adenomas have shown that with time five patients showed a significant shrinkage of their tumors.²

Keeping in mind the basic rule of medicine ("Primum non nocere") while dealing with patients harboring brain tumors, it is often possible to avoid many attendant complications in what may turn out to be a short time to live. Although "To err is human," careful practice is very important for the principle "Primum non nocere".

References

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