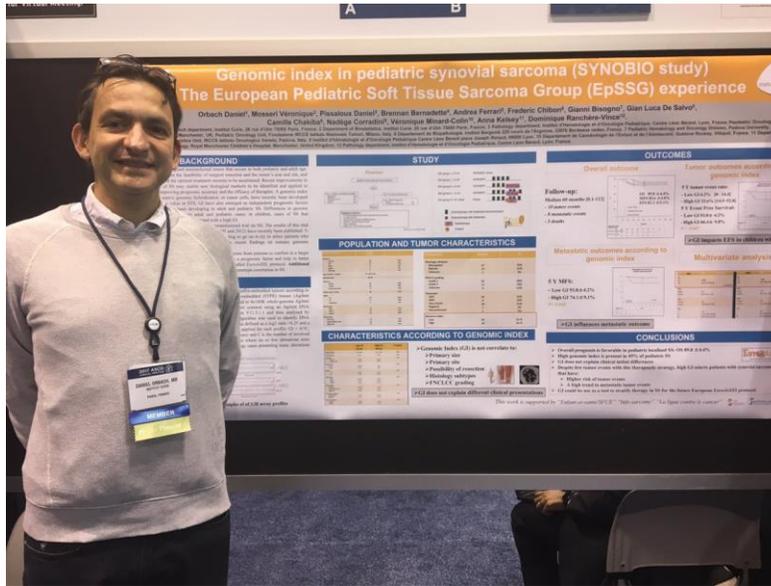


Pediatric cancers : “What is cancer, Doctor?”

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1. What is cancer?

Cancer is an important disease.

Tiny cells in our body divide themselves and increase in a completely weird manner. Little by little they will form a “ball” or tumor that will grow and grow.

Sometimes they will go somewhere else in the body (called metastasis) and block organs, which then won't function anymore.

This tumor, when it occurs on a bone, provokes pain and makes it difficult for the child to walk and makes him/her limp.

The goal of the treatment is to block those cells and to get rid of the tumor so it won't spread and come back. Cancer or rather cancers are not the same for children and adults.

Children or teenagers having cancer are treated in hospitals in a special department called “pediatric oncology.”

These diseases are not contagious which means you can't catch them by talking to or touching someone having cancer.

2. Why did I catch cancer?

Most of the time, children get cancer by accident. There is no one responsible for getting cancer. It's not the fault of the patient, his/ her parents or even the doctors.

Very rarely, those diseases affect several people in the same family. If that is the case, then it is called a genetic disease.

Cancers exist everywhere in the world and are not directly linked to pollution, germs or cell phones.

3. Is this disease common?

These diseases are rare in children. However, they can occur at any age, from a baby to a teenager. However, among children they occur most often in young children aged around 5 and 6 years old.

4. How is it cured?

The treatment is different for each type of cancer. It depends on the age of the child, where the disease occurs in the body, its extent and the possibility to remove the tumor by surgery. Most of the time, after exams are performed to know where the disease is, the treatments start with medications called "chemotherapy."

These medications are infused through a small tube placed in a vein in the patient's neck. This small tube is called a "catheter." It's kept in place during the whole treatment, that is to say, most of the time over a period of several months.

Generally, these chemotherapies are given by "sessions," namely during several days at the hospital. For some types of cancer (blood cancer or leukemia), the treatment can be limited to chemotherapy.

For some other types of cancer, like bone cancer, after a few months of treatment, a surgeon surgically removes the tumor and analyzes it on a microscope. Then the chemotherapies are continued for several months.

Sometimes, "radiation therapy or radiotherapy" can be added to these treatments. It's a treatment by radiation beams given through a small camera placed above the tumor. Most of the time, this treatment is given 15 minutes a day for 6 months.

To be able to tolerate these treatments sometimes one has to take medications by mouth to prevent vomiting, to consolidate bones or to avoid infections. Between chemo sessions, when one has cancer in a leg or an arm, it's necessary to receive rehabilitation. This can be done in a "short term rehabilitation center" (in France it is called "NDT").

During the treatments, the parents can stay with the patient even if sometimes they can't sleep in the same room. Of course, to verify that everything is fine during the treatments, a lot of exams are done (blood tests, CT scans, ultrasounds). This is to make sure that the chemotherapies are going well and that the disease process is slowing and stopping correctly.

5. What are the immediate effects of the treatment?

A surgery is always performed under anesthesia to avoid pain. After surgery, painkillers are provided to the patient to avoid pain. Of course, it takes several days after a surgery to recover.

The chemotherapy medications are sometimes difficult to tolerate because they are responsible for vomiting, loss of appetite, and a drop in white blood cell count. In that case, transfusion and antibiotics in case of fever are necessary.

Additionally, these treatments sometimes cause hair loss. During the whole treatment process, the patient may be totally bald. But the hair will grow back in a few weeks after the end of the chemotherapy and it will come back as it was before the treatment. Radiotherapy can also cause skin redness like a sunburn.

6. Does cancer come back after treatment?

Most of the children treated for cancer are cured but they are closely watched for years after the end of the treatments. During routine checkups, pediatricians verify that there is no problem.

Sometimes the disease comes back (called a relapse). At that point, treatments have to be done again.