Morphine and the Cancer Process

If a patient has lung cancer, and morphine is administered for the pain, does the morphine speed up the process?

Erin McMenamin, MSN, CRNP, AOCN, Pain Medicine Nurse Practitioner and Program Manager at the Abramson Cancer Center of the University of Pennsylvania, responds:

Morphine will not speed up the process of the cancer. Morphine is in a class of medications called opioids (commonly known as narcotics). They are medications that bind with a receptor in the body to alter the perception of pain in the brain. These medications are used for a variety of painful conditions, including surgery, chronic pain, and cancer, just to name a few. The medications are intended to be used for the relief of pain, and hopefully will also result in an improvement in the patient's quality of life. When used appropriately, they are among the most effective and safest classes of medications available for pain, with the fewest side effects.

In addition, morphine used for comfort at the end of life does not speed up the process of death. Morphine may be used to make sure the patient is comfortable in the final moments of life. It is the overall disease process that got the patient to this point, not using morphine to make him or her comfortable. If the patient had the opioid (pain medication) titrated (adjusted) slowly, it would not be the cause of death. The patient would have to take approximately three times the usual dose in order to cause significant changes in breathing. Nonetheless, this is often a question that lingers in the minds of family members. The key question is - would the patient have suffered if he or she did not have the Morphine? Most likely the answer is yes, and so you did the right thing.

No