

Building a Simple Way of Knowledge in Palliative Care

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The dramatic advances in clinical therapy and nutrition have produced a progressive increase in life expectancy. Due to the ageing of population, a growing proportion of persons may develop, during their life-time, progressive chronic illnesses (cancer, cardiovascular diseases, dementia, debilitating arthritis, infective diseases) with a consequential greater need for social and economic support. Palliative care recognizes the responsibility of attending to the needs of these patients with their families.

Physicians involved in palliative care should relieve pain and the other symptoms: they have expertise in symptoms management and in the communication skills to improve discussion with patients and their families about treatment possibilities, preferences and goals of care.

Palliative care focuses primarily in diagnosing and treating symptoms experienced by patients with progressive incurable diseases. The ultimate goal of palliative care is to improve quality of life for both the patient and the family, regardless of diagnosis.

Moreover, palliative care reduces the need of hospitalization, diagnostic and treatment interventions and nonbeneficial intensive care [1].

The mandatory aim of palliative care is the relief of the "total pain" of a dying person and his family. What is the "total pain"? As firstly described by Cecily Saunders, total pain is the sum of patient's physical, psychological, social and spiritual pain [2].

Despite the efforts in cure cancer and other chronic and progressive diseases, when the cure is not longer the goal, many questions and needs remain unresolved.

Are symptoms systematically assessed and treated? Are decision-making processes supported and displayed in this medical field? Which kind of real and practical aid is offered to patients and their families?

Unfortunately, many differences in care intensity and care quality exist worldwide: a dramatic disparity in terms of access to palliative care is present in different areas of the same country and much more disparity exists between developed and developing countries. Could the financial crisis negatively impact such disparities? Probably, yes. In a recent report from the Economist Intelligent Unit case fatality from cancer was 46% in high-income countries compared with 75% in low-income countries [3].

During the past decade, substantial progress has been made in developing strategies and interventions for improving symptom management.

Despite this, pain remains one of the most feared symptoms and it still represents a major problem: in a recent systematic review pain was reported in 59% of cancer patients with metastatic/terminal disease [4].

The impact of undertreated pain can negatively influence physical functioning, psychological well-being and social interactions [5].

In a pan-European survey 69% of cancer patients reported pain-related difficulties with daily activities [6].

Recently, WHO estimated that over 80% of world's population is inadequately treated for moderate and severe pain [7].

Palliative care should relieve physical symptoms, alleviate depressive symptoms and family's burden: as recent papers have reported, a well

planned and integrated intervention could positively affect both quality and duration of life in terminally-ill cancer patients [8-10]. Such data should drive our forward-looking agenda: rapid solutions are needed and many answers are possible.

For example, an exciting challenge for the future should be the global improvement of knowledge in medicine. This mission will be achieved if every new scientific finding will be available for all without significant costs: consequently, internet is a real worldwide possibility and opportunity and open-access journals could help this process of knowledge.

Such use of technology could promote general awareness of the medical advances: this aspect seems to be of particular interest in palliative care, an interdisciplinary area that still presents several criticisms in terms of care standardization all over the world.

Journal of Palliative Care & Medicine is an open access journal that promotes progress in knowledge in palliative care and allows people in the medical community and patients to know the latest advances and findings in this field.

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