

Journal Watch

Palliative Care for Families: Remembering the Hidden Patients.

Kristjanson LJ, Aoun S. Can J Psychiatry 2004; 49:359-65

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Abstract

Families of patients receiving palliative care are profoundly affected by the challenges of the illness. They observe care that the patient received, provide care for the patient, and receive support from health professionals in the form of information, counseling, or practical assistance. As they witness and participate in the patient's care, they judge the quality of care that the patient receives. They often see themselves as the patient's care advocates and may harbour regret and guilt if they believe that the patient did not have the best possible care. The illness experience profoundly affects family members' physical health; recognition of this has coined the term "hidden patients." This article briefly synthesizes empirical work that suggests how to best support families in a palliative care context. We discuss how to define the family, emphasizing a systems approach to family care. We describe the impact of the illness on the family in terms of family members' health, family communication issues, psychological issues, needs for information, physical care demands, and family costs of caring.

Comments

Strengths/uniqueness:

This article summarizes findings from literature about families of terminally ill patients and identifies the most relevant issues in caring for these families.

Weaknesses:

The review was not exhaustive of all the relevant literature. Empirical work related to families in a palliative care context is quite recent and is only beginning to be seen as an important area.

Relevance to Palliative Care:

The impact of a terminal illness on the family has significant effect on the physical, mental and financial well-being of family caregivers.

Family caregivers have unmet needs for communication, information and support. It is critical to monitor the needs of family caregivers and target those most in need with therapeutic interventions.