

Cancer patients' reported experiences of suffering

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Abstract:

This study describes the nature and content of experiences of suffering by patients with incurable cancer. The main body of data was collected in interviews. A structured questionnaire was administered for additional information. Three different dimensions were identified in patient experiences of suffering: physical, psychologic and social. Suffering has a physical foundation, which was divided into two categories: that caused by the illness itself and that caused by treatment of the illness. The primary sources of physical suffering were fatigue, pain and the side effects of chemotherapy. The causes of psychologic suffering lie in the physiologic changes associated with the disease and in the imminence of death. Psychologic suffering was most typically manifested in depression, which most of the patients suffered during the initial stages of the disease, when the disease metastasized, and when they were in a particularly poor condition. General deterioration and fear of infection very much restrict the social life of cancer patients, causing them to withdraw into their home or the hospital.

Comments:Strengths:

1. Trying to address the experience of suffering (and particularly its meaning to the patients) rather than studying one or a group of symptoms.
2. Validity and reliability of the questionnaire were reported.

Weaknesses:

1. Relatively small sample.
2. The adopted definition of suffering does not typically fit for cancer patients with moderate to severe symptoms.

Relevance to palliative care:

1. It appears that total suffering of cancer patients is directly proportional to the intensity of their physical symptoms.
2. It could be helpful for health professionals to be aware of the extent and meaning of suffering experienced by their patients. This might enable them to better understand and acknowledge their patients' experience of suffering.