

The Impact of Palliative Care on Cancer Patients' Well-being: A Review of Current Literature

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ABSTRACT

Cancer remains one of the leading causes of disability and death worldwide, with its incidence continually increasing. As many treatments become less effective in the advanced stages of cancer, and with the growing importance of palliative care in managing pain and promoting comfort, it is crucial to conduct studies that examine the impact of palliative care on various aspects of cancer patients' lives. This review was conducted to assess the impact of palliative care on the quality of life in cancer patients. A search was conducted using the keywords cancer, palliative, sedative, patient, care, and quality in scientific databases such as PubMed, Scopus, and ScienceDirect. Findings from multiple studies indicate that palliative care is essential in all age groups to ensure patient-centered care. This review emphasizes the importance of initiating palliative care early to maximize benefits for patients, with a particular focus on elderly care. Palliative care contributes to faster recovery, shorter hospital stays, and reduced treatment and hospitalization costs. Strengthening support systems, fostering a culture of resilience, and ensuring access to palliative care for cancer patients are critical components for improving patient outcomes.

Keywords: Cancer, Cancer patients, Palliative care, Quality of life

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Introduction

Cancer remains one of the leading causes of death and disability worldwide, and its prevalence is rising steadily. It is the second most common cause of death globally, following cardiovascular diseases, with approximately seven million people dying from cancer annually [1-3]. This disease severely impacts both individuals' health and their overall quality of life [4, 5].

Quality of life in cancer patients is influenced not only by the physical changes associated with the illness but also by the psychological and emotional effects of the diagnosis and disease progression. Emotional responses such as sadness, grief, and anger, combined with the patient's reaction to diagnostic results and the disease's prognosis, all play a significant role in shaping the patient's experience [6-8]. Quality of life is a complex and multidimensional concept that encompasses various elements such as satisfaction with life, physical and mental health, social well-being, and hope. For cancer patients, as with other chronic conditions, the primary aim of healthcare teams, particularly nursing professionals, is to enhance patients' functioning and optimize their quality of life [1, 9, 10].

Palliative care, which focuses on alleviating suffering, is built on the principles of continuous and transparent communication, regular clinical assessments, and addressing spiritual needs, while ensuring coordination across hospital services and nursing care [11-13]. Nurses' presence and compassion in caring for patients fulfill crucial spiritual needs, enabling a deeper understanding of the patient's specific concerns and desires [14, 15].

Furthermore, nurses' own experiences with caregiving or the loss of loved ones positively influence their approach to end-of-life care, motivating them to develop further expertise in this area, which ultimately improves patient care [16].

A qualitative study in Scotland revealed that many cancer patients who had not previously held religious beliefs sought spiritual connections in their final days, hoping this would enhance their quality of life [8]. Research in Italy involving cancer patients between the ages of 18 and 65 years identified anxiety as the most significant factor affecting their quality of life. Additional factors included advanced age, low education levels, and unemployment. It was found that palliative care provided by nurses could reduce patient anxiety levels [17].

Significant progress has been made in the promotion of palliative care through interprofessional educational programs [18-20]. Farin and Nagel [21] demonstrated that the implementation of online interprofessional education programs had a positive impact on palliative care delivery. Since many treatments become ineffective during the late stages of cancer [22, 23], and given the increasing importance of palliative care in alleviating pain and fostering a sense of well-being, it is crucial to conduct research that investigates the impact of palliative care on the various aspects of life for cancer patients. This study aims to review and evaluate the effects of palliative care on cancer patients' quality of life.

Materials and Methods

This study is a review that focuses on quantitative research while excluding qualitative studies. For the review, relevant articles were identified using specific keywords such as cancer, palliative, sedative, patient, care, and quality, which were searched within scientific databases including PubMed, Scopus, and ScienceDirect. The search parameters were designed based on predefined concepts and keywords associated with the research topic. Advanced search techniques involving logical operators like AND, OR, and NOT were utilized to narrow down the search results according to publication dates and titles. The time frame for the literature search was set between the years 2000 and 2023. The review process followed a structured methodology that included selecting research questions, establishing inclusion criteria, identifying relevant studies, selecting appropriate studies, assessing study quality, extracting relevant data, and then analyzing and presenting the findings [24].

Results and Discussion

Among the studies reviewed, Yamagishi *et al.* [25] and Rangachari and Smith [12] focused on the effects of palliative care interventions in the lives of cancer patients. Dionne-Odom *et al.* [26] explored rapid palliative care, while Rosenberg and Wolfe [27] addressed palliative care for adolescents and young adults, a group facing unique challenges due to developmental and psychosocial factors, and whose cancer may remain undiagnosed or untreated for extended periods. Palliative care is intended to enhance quality of life by managing symptoms and reducing physical, social, psychological, and spiritual distress [27].

Himmelstein [28] examined the ethical dilemmas in pediatric palliative care, and Knops *et al.* [29] discussed ways to enhance palliative care for children, providing valuable guidelines for symptom management and diagnosis. Balducci and Dolan [30] investigated palliative care for older adults, noting that communication barriers due to hearing, cognition, expectations, and cultural differences can complicate care planning. Cancer pain is a major obstacle to maintaining independence and managing fatigue, highlighting the importance of palliative care in this population. Tailored treatment plans are essential, considering the variation in life expectancy, treatment response, functional ability, and social support among elderly cancer patients [30].

Ferrell and Baird [4] stressed that quality palliative care depends on addressing spiritual concerns, and spiritual support can significantly impact a patient's overall experience [28]. Barbera *et al.* [6] found that providing high-quality care can greatly improve cancer patients' quality of life. Farin and Nagel [21] and Rose and Yates [22] also discussed the significance of quality of life for cancer patients and how it influences their daily living.

Wittenberg-Lyles *et al.* [18] looked at communication training for palliative care providers, while Schuit and Sleijfer [31] explored cancer patient compensation. Research by Zimmermann *et al.* [32] and Dionne-Odom *et al.* [26] highlighted the importance of starting palliative care early to maximize benefits for both patients and their caregivers.

Finally, studies by Mok and Chu [33], Shahnazari [34], and Tornøe *et al.* [35] emphasized the importance of effective communication between nurses and patients. Professional and empathetic communication builds trust and has a profound effect on the treatment process, empowering patients. Nurses also play a critical role in alleviating pain and providing emotional support, which strengthens the bond between patients and their families.

Conclusion

Cancer-related physical and mental health declines significantly impact the quality of life of patients, often leading to job loss, family breakdowns, disrupted social interactions, and an inability to fulfill personal and social responsibilities. According to Rangachari and Smith [12], palliative care is essential in enhancing the functioning and overall performance of cancer patients. Zimmermann *et al.* [32] demonstrated that for lung cancer patients, early palliative care significantly improved quality of life and mood, with these patients also experiencing less invasive care towards the end of life and living longer. For those with advanced cancers, quality of life declines progressively, and early palliative care can help mitigate this deterioration by addressing multiple aspects of well-being [32]. Similarly, Dionne-Odom *et al.* [26] emphasized that palliative care should begin as early as possible to maximize benefits for both patients and caregivers. Palliative care continues through the illness process, regardless of the treatment type [36, 37]. A study involving 398 cancer patients in the U.S. indicated that mental health deterioration following a cancer diagnosis also compromises other areas of life quality [24].

Feelings of helplessness and powerlessness are common among terminally ill patients. A survey of 103 palliative care patients found that feelings of isolation, loss of control, and uncertainty lead to significant psychological distress [38, 39]. In a study by El-Jawahri *et al.* [40], it was found that palliative care enhanced the quality of life and reduced depression among leukemia patients. Borimnezhad *et al.* [41] discussed palliative care's dual role—focusing on end-of-life care while also improving the quality of life throughout all stages of illness. Meghani [42] explained that palliative care is not limited to end-of-life scenarios but aims to improve the overall quality of life for all patients at various stages of their illness. Barbera *et al.* [6] reported that in Canada, 54% of cancer patients died in hospitals, but those receiving palliative care experienced a more peaceful death with reduced aggressive treatments.

At the end of life, palliative care becomes crucial since curative treatments are no longer effective. These interventions begin when a life-threatening illness is diagnosed and continue until recovery or death. Palliative nursing care should prioritize patient comfort, avoiding unnecessary procedures and treatments that might disrupt the patient's peace [34]. Nurses' presence plays a vital role in fulfilling patients' spiritual needs and understanding their concerns [42].

Effective professional communication, grounded in trust, is vital in palliative care. As Chiu and Mok noted, when the nurse-patient relationship is based on trust, patients view nurses not just as caregivers but as part of their support system. This trust can significantly enhance care quality and patient outcomes [33]. Nurses can alleviate suffering and establish deep connections with both patients and their families, which strengthens patients and encourages a more meaningful life experience [35]. Nurses' attitudes toward death and end-of-life care should align with their humanistic values. When nurses maintain a compassionate approach to death, they are better equipped to provide meaningful care to patients nearing the end of life [43, 44].

Banazadeh *et al.* [16] also found that nurses who had experienced the death of a family member were more empathetic towards end-of-life care. Such personal experiences foster a deeper understanding of the supportive behaviors necessary for providing quality care. Research consistently shows that palliative care significantly enhances both the quality of life and life expectancy of cancer patients. Therefore, it is essential to integrate palliative care into cancer treatment strategies to manage complications, alleviate suffering, and improve overall well-being. Palliative care plays a critical role in helping cancer patients regain a sense of control over their illness and enhancing their quality of life by addressing functional, cognitive, and social needs. It reduces unnecessary treatments, alleviates symptoms, improves family satisfaction, and lowers healthcare costs by reducing hospital stays. Establishing supportive care systems and fostering a culture that adapts to cancer patients' challenges is essential. By identifying the specific needs of cancer patients, nurses can create supportive environments that promote recovery and improve quality of life.

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