

Palliative Care Practices During A Pandemic: A Descriptive Qualitative Study

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Background

- At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic the number of daily deaths due to COVID-19 skyrocketed from 16 on March 15th, 2020 to 6,489 deaths on April 15th, 2020.
- Unprecedented demand for palliative care at a time when in-person communication was highly restricted, straining efforts to care for and comfort patients and families.
- Quality guidelines exist for palliative care, but none have been tested during a pandemic, presenting unique and often uncomfortable challenges to palliative care providers.

Purpose

- Describe the strategies palliative care clinicians adopted to cope with new challenges including patient and clinician isolation, prognosticating an unknown disease, and rapidly rising numbers of severely ill patients.
- Identify additions or adjustments to in-person and system-related palliative care protocols, training, methods, and tools made during pandemics.

COVID-19 has demonstrated palliative care skills are essential to quality care, the value of integration with ICU and ER teams, and the importance of primary palliative care in training.

Methods

N=25
Semi-structured
~30 min interviews
with palliative care
clinicians

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Descriptive
qualitative with
thematic data
analysis

Results – Themes

Main theme:

- Seismic Paradigm Shift in Palliative Care

Sub themes:

- Shifting Attitudes and Systems: Collective Uncertainty
- Breaking with the Past: An Integrated Concept of Palliative Care
- Building Resiliency: Primary Palliative Care Training

“There was a concerted effort to integrate palliative care, a very active effort to integrate palliative care in the care of all ICU patients and all patients in the hospital who had taken a turn for the worse. And so, in that way, it was like 10 years’ worth of culture change in probably 2 days.” (ID02)

“...one thing that would change the way it feels to do palliative care would be better primary palliative care education starting five years ago.” (ID05)

“...a lot of teams have realized the importance of palliative care in this pandemic. And I think that we really should have more discussion of, in future pandemics or future emergencies, what role does palliative care play.” (ID35)

Future Directions

- Interdisciplinary Teams (IDT) include palliative care within ER and ICU
- Primary palliative care skills are implemented as foundational aspects of health care professions training
- Future policy is designed to reflect the essential nature of palliative care