

Errors in Palliative Care: Kinds, Causes, and Consequences: A Pilot Survey of Experiences and Attitudes of Palliative Care Professionals

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Reference: Isabel Dietz, MD, Gian Domenico Borasio, MD, Dipl Pall Med, Christoph Molnar, Christof Muller-Busch, MD Anke Plog, Gerhard Schneider, MD,¹ and Ralf J. Jox, MD, PhD JOURNAL OF PALLIATIVE MEDICINE Volume 16, Number 1, 2013

Abstract

Background: Medical errors have recently been recognized as a relevant concern in public health, and increasing research efforts have been made to find ways of improving patient safety. In palliative care, however, studies on errors are scant.

Objective: Our aim was to gather pilot data concerning experiences and attitudes of palliative care professionals on this topic.

Methods: We developed a questionnaire, which consists of questions on relevance, estimated frequency, kinds and severity of errors, their causes and consequences, and the way palliative care professionals handle them. The questionnaire was sent to all specialist palliative care institutions in the region of Bavaria, Germany (n = 168; inhabitants 12.5 million) reaching a response rate of 42% (n = 70).

Results: Errors in palliative care were regarded as a highly relevant problem (median 8 on a 10-point numeric rating scale). Most respondents experienced a moderate frequency of errors (1–10 per 100 patients). Errors in communication were estimated to be more common than those in symptom control. The causes most often mentioned were deficits in communication or organization. Moral and psychological problems for the person committing the error were seen as more frequent than consequences for the patient. Ninety percent of respondents declared that they disclose errors to the harmed patient. For 78% of the professionals, the issue was not a part of their professional training.

Conclusion: Professionals acknowledge errors—in particular errors in communication—to be a common and relevant problem in palliative care, one that has, however, been neglected in training and research.

Strengths

Semiquantitative questionnaire was validated (by the authors)
No industry funding & no payment offered to respondents

Weaknesses

Study design leads to selection (of respondent) bias
Results are not generalizable
Only 42% of respondents completed the survey

Relevance to Palliative Care

Patient safety is of paramount importance and there are many initiatives being undertaken by healthcare systems to improve performance in this field, such as the implementation of Med Rec. There is, however, little evidence available concerning the specific needs of palliative care and whether this discipline should be devising methods to improve patient safety for their patients. This study attempts to identify some of the issues specific to palliative care and follow up studies may identify areas of concern which should be addressed.

As healthcare professionals, we must always be cognizant of patient safety and how we may inadvertently cause errors and consequently endeavor to prevent them.