

Journal Watch

Should palliative care patients' hope be truthful, helpful or valuable? An interpretative synthesis of literature describing healthcare professionals' perspectives on hope of palliative care patients Erik Olsman, Carlo Leget, Bregje Onwuteaka-Philipsen and Dick Willems

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Abstract

Background: Healthcare professionals' perspectives on palliative care patients' hope influence communication. However, these perspectives have hardly been examined.

Aim: To describe healthcare professionals' perspectives on palliative care patients' hope found in the literature.

Design: The interpretative synthesis consisted of a quality assessment and thematic analysis of included articles.

Data sources: Literature search of articles between January 1980 and July 2011 in PubMed, CINAHL, PsycINFO and EMBASE and references of included studies. Search strategy: (palliat* or hospice or terminal* in title/abstract or as subject heading) AND (hope* or hoping or desir* or optimis* in title or as subject heading).

Results: Of the 37 articles, 31 articles were of sufficient quality. The majority of these 31 articles described perspectives of nurses or physicians. Three perspectives on hope of palliative care patients were found: (1) realistic perspective – hope as an expectation should be truthful, and healthcare professionals focused on adjusting hope to truth, (2) functional perspective – hope as coping mechanism should help patients, and professionals focused on fostering hope, and (3) narrative perspective – hope as meaning should be valuable for patients, and healthcare professionals focused on interpreting it.

Conclusions: Healthcare professionals who are able to work with three perspectives on hope may improve their communication with their palliative care patients, which leads to a better quality of care.

Strengths:

- Under-researched area focusing on health care providers' perspectives of hope
- Systematic approach for literature search and review
- Use of standard grading system to evaluate studies, though not well-described in the paper
- Use of more than one reviewer for subset of studies; 2nd reviewer blinded to the initial reviews
- Elaborate illustration of data analysis process in Appendices (only available electronically)

Weaknesses:

- Evaluation process for assessing studies could have been more clearly described
 - types of assessment tools used
 - number of studies reviewed by two reviewers
- Process for selecting studies for two reviewers not clear
 - first reviewer selected subset of papers for review by second reviewer, if studies were “neither of obviously good nor of poor quality”
 - less biased approach would have been to randomly select subset of papers
- Limitations identified by authors
 - Synthesis includes studies with different methodologies and philosophical foundations
 - Studies conducted within different countries (mainly Western) – limited generalizability to non-Western cultures
 - Main focus on health care providers working with advanced cancer patients
 - Quantitative studies only measured hope, did not examine professionals' hope definitions

Relevance to Palliative Care:

Hope plays an important role in the experiences of palliative care patients and their families. Although most health care professionals are aware of its importance, some may feel less prepared to deal with this issue in their interactions with patients and families. This paper provides a framework for conceptualizing hope within conversations, from three different perspectives. This framework provides a broader repertoire for integrating hope within clinical practice.