

Journal Watch

Screening for Psychological Distress in Palliative Care: A Systematic Review

Parvez Thekkumpurath, MRCPsych, Chitra Venkateswaran, MD, Manoj Kumar, MRCPsych, MD, and Michael I. Bennett, FRCP, MD. *J Pain Symptom Manage* 2008; 36: 520-528

Prepared by: Cheryl Nekolaichuk, PhD
Reviewed: Tertiary Palliative Care Unit 43, Grey Nuns Community Hospital
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Abstract

Psychological distress is common in the terminally ill. It is often underdetected and undertreated and has significant impact on the individual and family. There is a growing consensus on a broader concept of psychological suffering conceptualized as “distress” in the palliative care setting. Psychological screening programs play an important role in improving detection and management of distress. National and international guidelines recommend routine screening. This systematic review summarizes the evidence for screening for psychological distress in a palliative care setting. The review includes studies that compare screening questionnaires against a gold standard criterion of semistructured or structured psychiatric interview. Eight studies were identified which examined the performance of 10 screening questionnaires, ranging from single items to multidimensional questionnaires with up to 33 items. The performances of these questionnaires are described in terms of their sensitivity, specificity, and positive and negative predictive values. There are very few studies that examine the validity of questionnaires against credible criteria such as psychiatric interview and most studies have so far focused on depression. Unidimensional scales appear to perform equally well compared to the longer versions. This review summarizes the evidence, the quality of this evidence, and future challenges to improve identification and management of distress in palliative care.

Key Words: Distress, screening, palliative care, terminally ill, depression, anxiety, adjustment disorder, review, validation, questionnaires

Strengths

- Comprehensive literature search, with detailed description of search methods, including inclusion and exclusion criteria
- Comprehensive display of findings in table format
- Comprehensive description of and distinction between unidimensional and multidimensional screening approaches (as part of study findings).

Weaknesses

- The authors did not clearly describe how the articles included in the review were evaluated. An evaluation tool (for evaluating articles) was not included as part of the systematic review. No explanation was given for this.
- Studies were included only if the screening questionnaires were compared against a formal psychiatric interview, which excluded a large number of validation studies.
- Most of the studies in this review focused on depression, representing only a subset of “psychological distress” in palliative care.

Relevance to Palliative Care

- Psychological distress is very prevalent in the palliative care population, but may go undetected.
- Assessment and diagnosis of psychological distress is challenging in palliative care given patient vulnerability and physical frailty. The use of routine screening tools may assist in identifying patients who may be at risk and/ or are experiencing significant emotional distress.