

Palliative Care and Its Relevance Today: A Brief Review

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ABSTRACT

Palliative care is an approach to healthcare aimed at improving the quality of life for patients with serious or terminal illnesses and providing support to their families. This practice focuses on alleviating pain and other symptoms, considering the physical, emotional, social and spiritual aspects of the patient¹. It recognizes death as a natural process, without the intention of hastening or delaying it and can be integrated from the early stages of incurable diseases. Currently, around 40 million people require palliative care annually, but only 10% receive the necessary assistance. The demand is increasing due to population aging and the rise of chronic non-communicable diseases. The World Health Organization (WHO) emphasizes the importance of integrating palliative care into healthcare systems to ensure universal access to these essential services². In Brazil, palliative care has gained visibility in recent years, with the creation of public policies and state laws promoting its inclusion in the Unified Health System (SUS). However, challenges such as a lack of awareness among professionals and the general population, medication shortages and limited integration into the healthcare system still hinder its broad implementation. The relevance of palliative care is evident in the current global health context³. It provides an essential response to minimizing suffering in advanced stages of diseases and during the terminal phase while strengthening psychological and social support for those involved. With increasing disparities in access to these services, WHO underscores the need for national and global strategies to expand coverage, improve care quality and train multidisciplinary teams⁴.

Keywords: Palliative care; Oncology; Empathy; Pain

Introduction

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), as defined in 1990 and updated in 2002, “Palliative Care consists of assistance provided by a multidisciplinary team, aimed at improving the quality of life of patients and their families, in the face of a life-threatening disease, through the prevention and relief of suffering, early identification, impeccable assessment and treatment of pain and other physical, social, psychological and spiritual symptoms” (WHO, 2002). Illness places individuals face-to-face with existential questions rarely addressed in daily life. Our role is to help patients confront these questions, enabling them to experience and overcome suffering by organizing their internal concerns as closely as possible to life’s realities. Cicely Saunders (2006) defines the essence of palliative care by stating that suffering becomes intolerable only when no one provides care⁵. This highlights the importance of caregiving, even in the presence of life-threatening diseases or those beyond remission⁶.

Objectives

This study aims to promote awareness, training and humanization of palliative care among healthcare professionals, students and the general community⁷. It seeks to enhance the quality of life for patients with severe illnesses and their families through approaches prioritizing relief from suffering, emotional support and respect for human dignity.

Materials and Methods

The review was conducted through a bibliographic search in the PubMed and Scielo databases, including articles published over the past 10 years⁸.

Discussion

This work is essential to addressing this gap, providing healthcare professionals and the community with a deeper understanding of the importance of palliative care-not just to prolong life, but to ensure it is lived with quality and dignity until the end⁹. Moreover, the study seeks to demystify misconceptions about palliative care, showing that it is not limited to end-of-life situations but involves a comprehensive approach that can begin from the diagnosis of a serious chronic illness¹⁰.

Conclusion

Palliative care plays a crucial role in the healthcare system, particularly for patients with severe or terminal illnesses. However, a lack of knowledge and inadequate training in this field often result in insufficient management of pain and other symptoms, along with poor communication with patients and their families during challenging times¹¹. It is essential to understand family dynamics, pain and suffering and to act in ways that provide support during the most difficult moments-not only during the crisis but also with multidisciplinary support after the period of anguish and distress¹².

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