Integrating self-management into daily life following primary treatment: head and neck cancer survivors' perspectives

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Introduction

- Cancer self-management is the “awareness and active participation by the person in their recovery, recuperation and rehabilitation, to minimise the consequences of treatment, and promote survival, health and well-being”¹; p.6.
- Head & Neck Cancer (HNC) survivors face unique challenges following treatment (e.g. facial disfigurement and eating, swallowing, breathing & speech impairments) which strongly impact their physical, functional, social, and psychological wellbeing², and often require ongoing self-management³.
- However, little is currently known about how HNC survivors integrate self-management into their daily lives. Such research may identify how some HNC survivors successfully integrate self-management into their daily lives, while others do not.

Study Aim

- To describe and characterise the processes through which HNC survivors attempt to integrate self-management into their daily lives following primary treatment.

Methods

- We conducted 26 semi-structured interviews with HNC survivors (17 males, 9 females; aged 30-77) from four healthcare sites across Ireland.
- HNC survivors had undergone surgery, radiation or chemotherapy, or a combination thereof targeting a range of different sites (larynx, pharynx, oral cavity, tonsils, tongue).
- All participants were asked open-ended questions about how they managed condition-related challenges they had encountered following HNC treatment.
- Interviews were audio-recorded (mean length: 1.5 hours), typically in patients' homes, and transcribed for thematic analysis⁴.

Results

- We identified 6 themes relating to HNC survivors' attempts to integrate self-management into daily life following primary treatment.
- Three of these themes relate to a sequential process of self-management integration, two relate to HNC survivors' difficulties integrating self-management into daily life and the final over-arching theme relates to how HNC survivors interpret self-management in the context of their daily lives.

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Conclusion

- This is the first study to describe HNC survivors' attempts to integrate self-management into daily life treatment.
- The findings indicate that HNC survivors exhibit highly individualised approaches to self-management integration and abandon strategies that fail to meet their own specific needs.

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