Quality of dying and death during the last hospitalization of advanced cancer patients: A retrospective cohort study

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Introduction

Patients with advanced cancer are often cared for and die in hospitals in China. However, there is limited evidence about how end-of-life care is delivered during the last hospitalization before death in mainland China.

Objectives

The aims of this study were to:

1. Describe the symptoms terminal cancer patients experienced;
2. Describe the supportive measures advanced cancer patients received during the last hospitalization.

Methods

Method. A retrospective cohort study.

Setting. Three tertiary hospitals of Henan province, China.

Sample. Cancer decedents (aged ≥18years) between January 2016 to December 2017 during the last hospitalization before death were recorded in the electronic medical record. Those who died from non-cancer related causes were excluded.

Measurement. A data extraction form was developed by the research team. It was composed of:

- (1) Patients' characteristics;
- (2) Cancer-related symptoms;
- (3) Supportive measures

Results

- 427 cancer decedents were included in the study. Characteristics of the patients are listed in Table 1.
- Pain, loss of appetite and fatigue ranked the top three most common symptoms (Figure 1).
- Morphine was the most frequent analgesic. No measures targeting fatigue were documented. Psychological support was recorded in 39.8% of patients, just referring to the terms of psychological guidance or mental nursing without any other detailed information. No spiritual information was found in all of the charts (Table 2).

Figure 1 Symptom frequency of the study sample (n=427)

Table 1 Characteristics of the study sample (n=427)

Characteristics	Cases, n	Percentage (%)
Age (mean, SD)	66.2 (13.4)	
> 65 y of age	229	53.6
≤65 y of age	198	46.4
Sex		
Male	268	62.8
Female	159	37.2
Marital status		
Married	385	90.2
Unmarried	42	9.8
Place of residence		
Urban	406	95.1
Rural	21	4.9
Primary cancer		
Lung	138	32.3
Liver	48	11.2
Gastric	34	8.0
Colorectal	31	7.3
Pancreatic	26	6.1
Others	133	35.1

Table 2 Supportive measures received during the last hospitalization among advanced cancer patients (n=427)

Supportive measures	Cases, n	Percentage (%)
Analgesics		
No	123	28.8
Opioids	251	58.8
Non-opioids or weak opioids	53	12.4
Psychological support		
No	257	60.2
Psychological guidance	73	17.1
Psychological nursing	66	15.4
Others	31	7.3
Nutritional support		
By mouth	116	27.2
Enteral nutrition	56	13.1
Parenteral nutrition	76	17.8
By mouth & Parenteral nutrition	72	16.9
Enteral & Parenteral nutrition	84	19.6
Others	23	5.4

Conclusions

Quality of end-of-life care for cancer patients during the last hospitalization was not optimistic. More attention need to be paid to symptom control, such as pain and fatigue. Psychological or existential/spiritual needs need to be well documented and addressed in the future.