

Evaluating the Role of Nursing, Nutrition, and Social Support in Improving Quality of Life for Cancer Patients Undergoing Chemotherapy

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Abstract

Cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy often face a multitude of physical, emotional, and nutritional challenges that negatively impact their quality of life (QoL). This qualitative study explores the impact of multidisciplinary care involving nursing, nutritional, and social support on the QoL of cancer patients in a tertiary hospital setting. Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with 20 patients and healthcare professionals, respectively, to understand their experiences with multidisciplinary care. Thematic analysis revealed key themes: emotional and psychological support, nutritional counseling, coordination of care, and challenges in delivering multidisciplinary care. Participants emphasized the importance of emotional support from nurses and social workers, individualized nutritional guidance from nutritionists, and coordinated care among healthcare professionals. Despite the numerous benefits of multidisciplinary care, challenges such as time constraints and communication barriers were highlighted. The study underscores the significance of integrating emotional, nutritional, and coordinated care to enhance the QoL of cancer patients and recommends addressing barriers to further improve care delivery.

Keywords: Cancer care, Quality of life, Chemotherapy, Multidisciplinary care, Emotional support, Nutritional counseling, Social work, Qualitative study

Introduction

Cancer is a multifaceted disease that poses a significant challenge not only due to its physical manifestations but also because of the emotional, psychological, and nutritional demands placed on patients undergoing treatment (Ferrell et al., 1998). Chemotherapy, a common modality used in cancer treatment, is often associated with adverse effects such as fatigue, nausea, vomiting, anorexia, and weight loss, which can significantly impair patients' quality of life (QoL) (Sloan and Knowles, 2013). Therefore, providing comprehensive care that addresses the holistic needs of cancer patients is essential for optimizing their well-being during treatment.

Multidisciplinary care, involving healthcare professionals from various fields, plays a critical role in addressing the multiple dimensions of patient health. Nurses, nutritionists, and social workers contribute uniquely to improving cancer patients' quality of life through different but complementary approaches. Nurses provide critical support by managing symptoms, educating patients, and coordinating care (McCorkle et al., 2011). Nutritionists are essential in ensuring that patients receive appropriate dietary counseling to manage chemotherapy-induced nutritional challenges, such as malnutrition and decreased appetite (Ravasco et al., 2005). Social workers, on the other hand, provide the necessary emotional support

and help patients cope with the psychological impact of cancer diagnosis and treatment (Northouse et al., 2000).

The integration of nursing, nutritional, and social support in the care of cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy can significantly improve health outcomes and quality of life. Research has shown that patients who receive this kind of holistic care are better equipped to manage side effects, adhere to treatment, and maintain an overall positive outlook (Bahrami, 2011). The present study aims to evaluate the combined impact of nursing, nutritional, and social interventions on the quality of life of cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy, highlighting the importance of a multidisciplinary approach to comprehensive cancer care.

Literature Review

The concept of quality of life (QoL) is central to the care of cancer patients, particularly those undergoing chemotherapy, as this population often experiences a myriad of side effects that can affect their physical and emotional well-being (Sloan and Knowles, 2013). Various studies have explored the roles of nursing, nutrition, and social work in improving QoL for cancer patients, with evidence pointing towards the benefits of a multidisciplinary approach (Ferrell et al., 1998).

Nursing care plays a pivotal role in managing cancer treatment side effects and providing psychological support to patients. McCorkle et al. (2011) emphasized that self-management interventions led by nurses can empower patients to take an active role in managing their symptoms, thereby enhancing their QoL. Nurses often serve as the main point of contact for patients, helping them navigate their treatment journey and providing education on symptom management and treatment adherence.

Nutritional support is another critical component of care for patients undergoing chemotherapy. Nutritional challenges, such as loss of appetite, weight loss, and malnutrition, are common among these patients and can adversely affect their treatment outcomes (Ravasco et al., 2005). Ravasco et al. (2005) conducted a randomized controlled trial that demonstrated how individualized dietary counseling significantly improved patient outcomes, including nutritional status, treatment tolerance, and overall QoL. Adequate nutrition is essential for maintaining physical strength and supporting the immune system, which is crucial for patients undergoing the physically demanding process of chemotherapy.

Social support, facilitated by social workers, also plays a key role in improving QoL for cancer patients. The emotional and psychological burden of a cancer diagnosis can be overwhelming, affecting not only the patient but also their family members. Northouse et al. (2000) highlighted the importance of psychosocial interventions in helping patients and their families adjust to the cancer experience. Social workers provide counseling, connect patients with community resources, and assist with financial and practical issues that may arise during treatment.

The integration of these disciplines into a cohesive, multidisciplinary approach has been shown to have significant benefits for cancer patients. Bahrami (2011) discussed the nature of supportive care provided by cancer nurses, emphasizing the value of collaboration between healthcare professionals in addressing the complex needs of cancer patients. Patients who receive coordinated care from nurses, nutritionists, and social workers are more likely to experience improved symptom management, better nutritional status, and enhanced emotional well-being, all of which contribute to an improved QoL.

Overall, the literature suggests that a multidisciplinary approach to cancer care—incorporating nursing, nutritional, and social support—can effectively address the diverse needs of patients undergoing chemotherapy. By combining their expertise, healthcare professionals can provide holistic care that improves patients' ability to manage side effects, adhere to treatment, and maintain a positive outlook during their cancer journey.

Methodology

This qualitative study was conducted in a tertiary hospital to explore the impact of multidisciplinary care involving nursing, nutritional, and social support on the quality of life of cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy. A purposive sampling technique was used to recruit participants, ensuring a diverse representation of patients undergoing chemotherapy who had received multidisciplinary care. The sample included 20 participants who had been treated within the hospital's oncology unit.

Data collection was carried out through semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to share their experiences in their own words. The interviews were conducted in a private setting within the hospital to ensure confidentiality and encourage open discussion. Each interview lasted between 45 to 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' consent. The interview questions focused on the patients' perceptions of the support provided by nurses, nutritionists, and social workers, and how this support influenced their quality of life during chemotherapy treatment.

In addition to patient interviews, focus group discussions were conducted with healthcare professionals, including nurses, nutritionists, and social workers, to gain insights into their perspectives on providing multidisciplinary care. The focus groups consisted of 5-7 participants each and explored the challenges, strategies, and perceived benefits of delivering coordinated care to cancer patients.

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data. The interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim, and the data were coded to identify emerging themes. Thematic analysis allowed for the identification of common patterns and unique experiences related to the impact of multidisciplinary care on patients' quality of life. Key themes that emerged included the importance of emotional support, the role of dietary counseling in managing treatment side effects, and the value of coordinated care in improving overall well-being.

Trustworthiness of the data was ensured through member checking, where participants were given the opportunity to review and validate the findings. Triangulation was also employed by comparing data from patient interviews and focus group discussions with healthcare professionals to provide a comprehensive understanding of the multidisciplinary care experience.

Findings

Thematic analysis of the data revealed several key themes and sub-themes that reflected the participants' experiences with multidisciplinary care. These themes highlight the role of nursing, nutritional, and social support in enhancing the quality of life for cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy.

Theme 1: Emotional and Psychological Support

Sub-theme 1.1: The Role of Nurses in Providing Emotional Comfort

Participants consistently emphasized the importance of emotional support provided by nurses. Nurses were

often seen as the primary source of reassurance and empathy during treatment. One participant stated, "The nurses always knew when I was feeling down, and they would sit with me, listen to me, and encourage me to stay positive. That made a big difference in my journey."

Sub-theme 1.2: Social Workers as Emotional Anchors

Social workers played a vital role in providing emotional support, especially in helping patients and their families cope with the psychological impact of cancer. A participant shared, "The social worker helped me and my family understand what was happening. They were there for us emotionally, and it helped me feel less alone."

Theme 2: Nutritional Counseling and Its Impact on Treatment

Sub-theme 2.1: Dietary Guidance to Manage Side Effects

The participants highlighted the positive impact of individualized nutritional counseling on managing chemotherapy-induced side effects. One patient noted, "The nutritionist helped me find foods that I could tolerate when I was feeling nauseous. Their advice made it easier for me to maintain my strength during treatment."

Sub-theme 2.2: Importance of Maintaining Nutritional Status

Participants also discussed the importance of maintaining good nutritional status during chemotherapy. A participant mentioned, "I lost my appetite completely, but with the dietitian's help, I managed to eat small, nutritious meals. It helped me feel more energetic, even on the tough days."

Theme 3: Coordination of Care and Its Benefits

Sub-theme 3.1: The Value of a Collaborative Approach

Participants appreciated the coordinated care provided by nurses, nutritionists, and social workers, emphasizing that the collaboration between these professionals improved their overall care experience. One participant expressed, "It felt like everyone was working together for me. The nurse, nutritionist, and social worker all knew what I needed, and they communicated well with each other. It made my treatment feel more manageable."

Sub-theme 3.2: Enhanced Quality of Life through Multidisciplinary Support

Participants reported an enhanced quality of life due to the multidisciplinary support they received. One patient described, "Having a whole team looking after me—not just focusing on the cancer but on my overall well-being—made a huge difference. I felt like I was treated as a whole person, not just a diagnosis."

Theme 4: Challenges in Delivering Multidisciplinary Care

Sub-theme 4.1: Time Constraints Faced by Healthcare Professionals

Focus group discussions with healthcare professionals revealed challenges such as time constraints, which limited the ability to provide in-depth support to patients. A nurse stated, "We try our best to be there for every patient, but sometimes, due to our workload, it becomes difficult to provide as much one-on-one time as we would like."

Sub-theme 4.2: Need for Better Communication Tools

Healthcare professionals also highlighted the need for better communication tools to facilitate multidisciplinary care. A social worker commented, "We need more streamlined ways to share information between the different team members so that we can ensure the best care for our patients."

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the critical role of multidisciplinary care in improving the quality of life for cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy. The themes that emerged from the analysis underscore the significance of emotional, nutritional, and coordinated care provided by nurses, nutritionists, and social workers in addressing the multifaceted needs of patients.

The emotional and psychological support provided by nurses and social workers was consistently emphasized by participants as a key factor in enhancing their well-being. This finding aligns with existing literature, which suggests that emotional support is crucial for helping patients cope with the psychological burden of cancer (Northouse et al., 2000). Nurses, often serving as the primary point of contact, provided empathy and reassurance, while social workers played a complementary role by supporting both patients and their families in managing the psychological impact of the diagnosis. These findings reinforce the importance of integrating psychological care into cancer treatment to improve patients' overall quality of life.

Nutritional counseling was also identified as a vital component of multidisciplinary care. Participants reported that individualized dietary guidance helped them manage treatment side effects, maintain nutritional status, and sustain energy levels during chemotherapy. The literature supports this finding, as studies have shown that nutritional interventions can lead to improved treatment tolerance and better outcomes for cancer patients (Ravasco et al., 2005). The role of nutritionists in providing tailored dietary recommendations is critical for mitigating the adverse effects of chemotherapy, particularly those related to malnutrition and weight loss. These findings highlight the need for ongoing nutritional assessment and intervention as part of comprehensive cancer care.

The value of a coordinated approach to care was another key theme that emerged from the study. Participants described how the collaboration between nurses, nutritionists, and social workers enhanced their overall care experience, making it more manageable and improving their quality of life. This finding is consistent with the literature, which emphasizes that a multidisciplinary approach can lead to better communication, improved care coordination, and more holistic support for patients (Bahrami, 2011). The positive impact of multidisciplinary care on patient outcomes underscores the need for healthcare systems to prioritize and facilitate effective teamwork among different healthcare professionals.

However, the study also identified several challenges in delivering multidisciplinary care. Time constraints were a significant barrier, with healthcare professionals noting that their workload often limited the amount of one-on-one time they could provide to patients. This finding highlights the need for better resource allocation and staffing to ensure that healthcare professionals have the time necessary to deliver comprehensive care. Additionally, the need for improved communication tools was identified as a challenge in coordinating care among team members. Addressing these challenges could further enhance the effectiveness of multidisciplinary care in supporting cancer patients.

Overall, the findings of this study provide important insights into the benefits and challenges of multidisciplinary care for cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy. The emotional, nutritional, and coordinated support provided by healthcare professionals plays a crucial role in improving patients' quality of life. To optimize the delivery of multidisciplinary care, it is essential to address the challenges of time constraints and communication barriers, ensuring that healthcare professionals can work effectively as a team to meet the complex needs of cancer patients.

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