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Public Perceptions of Social Work Intervention Strategies in Palliative Care for Terminally Ill Older Adults in Selected Hospitals in Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria

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Abstract
This study examined public Perception on Social Work Intervention Strategies of Palliative Care of Terminally Ill older adults in Selected Hospitals in Benin City, Edo State This study adopted the socio-ecology theory to explain the issue under investigation. A combination of quantitative and qualitative techniques was utilized to collect data from the respondents in the field and 400 copies of questionnaires were administered to respondents, while ten (10) social care workers were orally interviewed and also, and 4 family members whose loved ones were terminally ill were also interviewed and 2 terminally ill older adults were also engaged in an in-depth interview. The study recommended that older persons with life-limiting illnesses and their families require a quality of life that can be achieved through the provision of good palliative care that is available and accessible through several initiatives like the National Health Insurance Scheme (NHIS)in most government hospitals.

Keywords: Care, family, health, older adults, terminal illness.

Introduction

Globally, compassionate palliative care requires commitment from all levels of health care management and the collaboration of the family of the older adults that need care. This is alluded to the fact that many older persons who are diagnosed with chronic or advanced diseases or terminal diseases are inadequately cared for (Wagner, Austin, Davis, Hindmarsh, Schaefer, Bonomi, 2001). The reason for this attitude is that healthcare providers always attempt to give the older adults conventional treatments and hence prolong the older persons lifespan instead of focusing on the predominant goal of improving their quality of life. Palliative care focuses on patients who have serious life limiting illness by utilizing a holistic approach in order to decrease suffering and ameliorate their current situation (Sabrah, 2016). Prognostication of life expectancy is of the utmost importance to patients, families and healthcare professionals particularly in the setting of advanced and/or terminal disease.

Many important health care decisions, such as those regarding chemotherapy use, hospice referral, advance care planning, discharge, planning and personal finances are dependent on the

expected survival duration (Hui, Nooruddin, Didwaniya, Dev, La Cruz, Kim, Kwon, Hatching, Lien, &Bruera, 2014). In Nigeria, palliative care is usually not formalized and institutionalized because the care of the dying older adults and those suffering terminal illness are a combination of formal and informal approaches. This is because many people do not have informed knowledge about the role of social workers in palliative care. The public perceptions of the role of social workers in this context need a thorough scientific investigation to appreciate, incorporate, and utilize the services of social workers in the quest for efficient healthcare delivery systems in Nigeria.

Statement of the Research Problem

Professional social workers collaborate and synergize with nurses, doctors, and other clinical and complementary therapeutic specialists like physiotherapists and physiologists to provide practical, psychosocial and even spiritual support to those suffering from terminal and end-of-

life diseases. This end-of-life support becomes imperative because to a large extent, death and dying involve loss and transformation which usually overwhelm the individuals experiencing such excruciating sore and painful experiences hence they require help and support to manage older person feelings, pains, sense of loss, despair and accept the realities of death and dying (Watts, 2013). Social work palliative care for people with terminal diseases is anchored on the philosophy and best practice system of compassionate, terminal care that seeks to provide people with the opportunity to die as they choose, deciding where, under what circumstances, with whom present, in what state of consciousness, and with what life support he/she desires (Tang &McCorkel, 2001; Wright, 2015).

It is imperative to investigate the perception of social work palliative care by the people in selected hospitals in Benin City. This is because the non-availability of data and literature on the topical issue being investigated in the study area is occasioned by the dearth of scientific inquiring carried out by researchers in the area. This creates empirical and literature gap in the discourse of palliative care services in Nigeria. The rationale of this study is to fill this existing gap in empirical data and literature in the study area in the context of palliative care services.

Objective of the Study

The main objective was to examine the perception of social workers' palliative care services by the family members of people experiencing end-of-life as a result of terminal disease infections.

Literature Review

The field of palliative care social work can be improved through interventions such as awareness and education on the multidimensional roles of the social worker in providing palliative care i.e. more appreciation and optimization of the roles of the social workers in the multi-disciplinary team. This section reviews social workers' perspective and lived experiences and how they are perceived by other members of the medical team, the patients and their families as they (social workers) deal with and provides palliative needs of patients and develop treatment plans in attempt at solving the individual patient healthcare and other related issues.

At the global level, the World Health Organization (WHO) Resolution (2014) declared that palliative social work is a *sine qua non* in medical services in the 21st century and hence perceived that social work palliative care services as integral part of the interdisciplinary approach to health delivery system. WHO declared that many older persons will require palliative care in the feature given the overall ageing of the global population and the increased prevalence on non-communicable diseases? However, WHO (2016) posited that the lack of understanding and knowledge about palliative care in general is another major barrier limiting the appropriate access to palliative care for the older adults.

Palliative care social work as a specialized field has limited recognition in Africa besides the fact that it is not yet formally recognized as a specialized field. However, a study conducted by Freeman (2017) shows that palliative care social workers are perceived as counsellor, educator, and facilitator/liaison, as advocate, broker and enablers. Others are as conducting referrals, discharge planner, assessors and mediator and intermediary. According to this author palliative social worker are the professionals who provide services such as counselling and also link senior citizens to resources, carry out family therapy to help patient, social workers assess clients to find out what the problem really is, and then include the family and other stakeholders, social workers also provide bereavement counselling to people with life-limiting illnesses and help them through bereavement counselling to normalize their feelings towards what happened to them.

Theoretical Framework

The socio-ecology theory was originally propounded by Bronfenbrenner (1999) who posited that individuals are connected or linked to their environment because an individual's behaviour is to be understood within the context of their environment in which the behaviour takes place. In other words, individual behaviour is greatly influenced by their environment which provides the social stimuli, and the other members of the environment which directly or indirectly affects the individual. Social ecology theory was developed to further the understanding of the dynamic interactions among various personal and environmental factors.

This theory helps to understand the nexus between the social work education and training, and the influence these have on skills and competencies in delivering palliative care for the older adults. The crux of this theory is the centrality of understanding people as they relate to their environment (Bodes, 2006) which are integral to palliative care social work practice. Each person is a microsystem interacting interpersonally with other microsystems. In this context, the hospital environment, the social worker interacts with other microsystems that are the patients, families and the multi-disciplinary team members and more importantly how social workers are perceived and the reason for such perception by other members of the interdisciplinary team in the patients and their families.

Methods and Materials

This study employed a survey research design, engaging prospective participants through a one-time, cost-effective survey tailored to the study's focus. The target population encompassed all medical and paramedical staff in selected hospitals in Benin City, as well as families of terminally ill older adults present during data collection. Preliminary assessments indicated approximately 2,650 medical and paramedical staff, with the total population, including family members, estimated at around 3,000 (Adebayo et al., 2021). The purposive sample comprised 280 medical and paramedical staff, 100 family members of admitted patients, and 20 caregivers of out-care terminally ill patients. In total, 400 questionnaires were distributed, and 10 in-depth interviews were conducted with senior doctors and select family members, ensuring broad and relevant representation of stakeholders.

Socio-Demographic characteristics

These are the bio-data of the research participants. These include but not limited to the participants' age, marital status, sex, educational background, profession, ethnic and religious affiliation amongst others.

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Variables	Responses	Frequency	Percentage %
Sex	Male	281	70.2
	Female	119	29.8
	Total	**400**	**100**
Age in Years	11-20	28	7.0
	21-30	57	14.3
	31-41	89	22.2
	41-50	120	30.0
	51 above	106	26.5
	Total	**400**	**100**
Marital Status	Single	105	26.3
	Married	240	60.0
	Widow/Widower	36	9.0

	Divorced	19	4.7
	Total	**400**	**100**
Religion	Christianity	306	76.5
	Islam	30	7.6
	Traditional	38	9.5
	Others	26	6.5
	Total	**189**	**100**
Ethnic Groups	Benin	141	35.3
	Esan	77	19.2
	Etsako	64	16.0
	Igbo	50	12.5
	Yoruba	48	12.0
	Others	20	5.0
	Total	**189**	**100**

Source Field Survey, 2024

Table 1 above, where 281 participants representing 70.2% were males, while 119 participants constituting 29.8% were females. The result showed that there were more males participants than females in the study. With respect to the age of participants, the above chart shows that majority of the participants aged 41-50 years were 120 participants representing 30%, closely followed by those in age 51-60 years and above with 106 participants constituting 26.5% also, those that fell within the age bracket of 31-40 years were 89 participants which represent 22.2% participants, while 57 (14.3%) and 28 (7%) of the participants were within age 21-30 and 18-20 years

Table 3: The Public perception of social work palliative care services by the family members of older adults experiencing end-of-life as a result of terminal disease infection

Variables	**Responses**	**Frequency**	**Percentage %**
Family members whose loved one is terminally ill, have been able to access palliative care services	Strongly Agree	34	8.5
	Agree	39	9.7
	Undecided	18	4.5
	Strongly Disagree	183	45.8
	Disagree	126	31.5
	Total	**400**	**100**
Family members whose older adult is terminally ill have been counseled by any social worker	Strongly Agree	38	9.5
	Agree	41	10.3
	Undecided	28	7.0
	Strongly Agree	173	43.3
	Disagree	120	30
	Total	**400**	**100**

Social workers in the hospital talk to you on how to cope with change and loss	Strongly Agree	69	17.3
	Agree	53	13.3
	Undecided	27	6.7
	Strongly Agree	139	34.7
	Disagree	112	28.0
	Total	**400**	**100**
Older adults with terminal illness have been encouraged by a social worker since admitted?	Strongly Agree	67	16.8
	Agree	60	15.0
	Undecided	26	6.5
	Strongly Disagree	136	34.0
	Disagree	111	27.7
	Total	**400**	**100**

Source: Field Survey, 2024

Table 3 indicate that public perception of social work palliative care services among family members of terminally ill older adults is largely unfavourable. Specifically, 45.8% and 31.5% of respondents strongly disagreed and disagreed, respectively, that their terminally ill relatives had accessed palliative care services, whereas only 8.5% and 9.7% strongly agreed and agreed, and 4.5% were undecided (Eze et al., 2022). Furthermore, 43.3% and 30% of participants strongly disagreed and disagreed that they had received counselling from social care workers, while merely 9.5% and 10.3% strongly agreed and agreed, and 7% remained undecided. These results highlight significant gaps in the provision and accessibility of social work-led palliative care and counselling services for families of terminally ill older adults in the selected hospitals

One of the participants who is a doctor said:

Yes, terminally ill older adults benefit from palliative care service in our hospital but very few. This is because most of the older persons and their families are not aware of the palliative care service (Doctor N, 16/5/2024).

One of the participants whose brother is terminally ill stated as follow:

Although doctors and nurses treat my sick old parents, they encourage and advise us as a family that we should believe in God because he is the one that heals. So, apart from the doctors and nurses no other person has assisted us in any way (Mr F.I, IDI 15/5/2024).

A participant who is a hospital social work staff affirmed that:

Terminally ill older aduts and their families receive palliative care service here but most times we are overwhelmed by the number of critically ill patients admitted in this hospital. For example, in this department we are just 23 members staff and the number of wards in this hospital is over 50 with some having up to 40 beds; in such a situation how do we cope. See when it comes to palliative care some older persons and their families want us to do some thing for like paying bills, filling forms,buying drugs, even giving them money to bury their dead **(**Ms Q, IDI 18/5/2024).

Discussion of Findings

It was established that the majority of the participants believe that palliative care services can help improve the lives of older adults suffering from terminal diseases if the management of the hospital practically implements the service. The findings agreed with Almada, Casquinha, Cotovio, Santos and Caixeir, (2018). Palliative care is an integrated approach that promotes the quality of life of older persons and families who are confronted with physical, psychosocial, and spiritual problems associated with life-threatening or terminal illness. The study finding also shows that only a few terminally ill older adults benefited from palliative care services.

This is because in one of the hospitals where this study was conducted, they do not render palliative care services while the hospitals that offer palliative service do not have money to effectively implement palliative services to older adults who need care. Furthermore, the research findings revealed that most of the social work staff who participated in the study admitted that there are barrier impeding on the effective implementation/practices of providing palliative care to terminally admitted patients in their hospital and this barriers are: failure of government to support hospitals in providing palliative, lack of resources, lack of awareness of palliative care by patients and cultural belief of terminally ill patients and their family.

Conclusion

Palliative care social workers work at individual, family, and community levels to provide comprehensive palliative care service and add to the quality of life of individuals suffering from terminal or life-threatening diseases and their families. Palliative care social work is in its infancy stage in Nigeria, in terms of practice, training, and research. However, the study showed that there is a significant and positive association in the responses of the participants, especially the doctors, nurses, and paramedical that palliative care helps older people suffering terminal disease" and that "Culture and palliative health care can help in emotional wellbeing

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study the following recommendations were made:

1. Training in palliative care and end-of-life care needs to be included in graduation level of social work education. More structured training programs are required during the academic period and as part of continuing education programs.
2. Older adults with life-limiting illnesses and their families require improved quality of life that can be achieved through the provision of good palliative care social work that is available and accessible through several initiatives like the National Health Insurance Scheme (NHIS).

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