

REVIEW

The influence of the covid-19 pandemic on palliative care

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Abstract

Objectives: The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on palliative care is a major concern globally, given that these services are vital for improving the quality of life for patients in advanced stages of illness. The aim of this study is to analyze the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on palliative care and identify the main challenges faced in delivering these services during the pandemic.

Materials and methods: A systematic search was conducted on PubMed and ScienceDirect between April 20, 2023, and April 28, 2023. The research was conducted following PRISMA guidelines and was limited to studies published in English between 2020 and 2022.

Results: Several changes brought about by the pandemic were identified, including an increase in the use of technology for remote care delivery (telemedicine), a rise in stress and anxiety among care providers and patients, restrictions on access to palliative care due to social distancing measures, as well as limitations on patient and family visits to hospitals and palliative care units.

Conclusions: The COVID-19 pandemic has created significant challenges in the provision of palliative care. Continuous efforts are needed to improve access to palliative care in these difficult conditions and ensure adequate preparedness of healthcare professionals to address similar crisis situations in the future.

Keywords: COVID-19, palliative care, pandemic, palliative care providers, visitation restrictions.

Rezumat

Obiective: Influenţa pandemiei de COVID-19 asupra îngrijirilor paliative reprezintă o preocupare majoră la nivel global, având în vedere că aceste servicii sunt vitale pentru îmbunătăţirea calităţii vieţii pacienţilor aflaţi în stadii avansate ale bolii. Scopul acestui studiu este de a analiza impactul pandemiei de COVID-19 asupra îngrijirilor paliative şi de a identifica principalele probleme întâmpinate în furnizarea acestor servicii în timpul pandemiei.

Materiale şi metode: S-a efectuat o căutare sistematică pe PubMed şi ScienceDirect între 20 aprilie 2023 şi 28 aprilie 2023. Cercetarea a fost efectuată în conformitate cu ghidurile PRISMA şi s-a limitat la studiile publicate în limba engleză între 2020 şi 2022.

Rezultate: Au fost identificate mai multe schimbări aduse de pandemie, printre care se numără: creşterea utilizării tehnologiei pentru a furniza îngrijiri la distanţă (telemedicina), creşterea stresului şi anxietăţii în rândul furnizorilor de îngrijiri şi a pacienţilor, restricţii în ceea ce priveşte accesul la îngrijiri paliative din cauza măsurilor de distanţare socială dar şi restricţii în vizitele pacienţilor şi a familiilor în spitale şi unităţi de îngrijire paliativă.

Concluzii: Pandemia de COVID-19 a creat o serie de provocări semnificative pentru furnizarea îngrijirilor paliative. Este nevoie de eforturi continue pentru a îmbunătăţi accesul la îngrijirile paliative în aceste condiţii dificile şi pentru a asigura o pregătire adecvată a personalului medical pentru a face faţă situaţiilor de criză similare în viitor.

Cuvinte cheie: COVID-19, îngrijiri paliative, pandemie, furnizori de îngrijiri paliative, restricţii de vizitare.

Introduction

Palliative care is a care modality that requires a complex approach that has the potential to improve the quality of life of patients facing chronic progressive (life-threatening) illnesses and their families by preventing and alleviating suffering, through early identification, correct assessment and treating

pain and other physical, psycho-social and spiritual problems. [1]

Access to palliative care is an essential component of health care and an integral part of universal health coverage but is still lacking in most parts of the world. The Lancet Commission on Global Access to Palliative Care and Pain estimates that more than 61 million people annually experience pain-related

health problems that could be significantly improved by palliative care. At least 80% of them do not have access to basic palliative care such as pain medication. [2] The need for palliative care is already increasing worldwide due to the ageing population and increases in the prevalence of noncommunicable diseases. [3]

Since the beginning of 2020, healthcare in general, and also palliative care, has undergone important changes. On March 11, 2020, the infection caused by the new SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus became an international pandemic. Over the following months, as the number of infected people increased, the COVID-19 pandemic caused an increase in hospital admissions, strained health systems and had implications for access to healthcare, with a significant reduction in appointments, diagnostic tests, and surgeries.

The impact of COVID-19 has reached all levels of healthcare, and palliative care has been no exception. Changes have been implemented to ensure the protection of patients, healthcare professionals and family members, in order to achieve a greater goal: controlling the pandemic. The pandemic has delayed and, in some cases, reversed progress in the development of palliative care. Access to palliative care has changed, along with changes for all areas of the health sector. However, the palliative care response, while still insufficient, has emerged in the face of this pandemic. [4]

The COVID-19 pandemic has put the entire healthcare system worldwide to the test, bringing major challenges in providing medical care. In particular, palliative care has been significantly affected by this pandemic, requiring rapid adaptations to cope with the new challenges. Palliative care is an important component of healthcare systems, aiming to improve the quality of life for patients with serious or terminal illnesses and their families. In this context, it is crucial to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected palliative care. In this article, we aim to analyze the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the accessibility and quality of palliative care, to evaluate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on patients who need palliative care but also on their families, to observe how the pandemic of COVID-19 has affected palliative care resources and staff.

Material and method:

In this literature review, we sought to identify relevant studies that allowed us to better understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on palliative care. A systematic search of PubMed and ScienceDirect was conducted to ensure broad coverage of relevant literature in the field of palliative care and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. To develop a robust search strategy, we identified keywords relevant to our topic, such as "COVID-19", "palliative care", "pandemic", "patient quality of life", "palliative care providers", "visit restrictions" and associated terms such as "symptoms", "pain management", "psychosocial support". We used combinations of these keywords along with logical operators such as "AND" and "OR" to get more relevant results.

Studies should focus on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on palliative care, looking at aspects related to symptom management, patient quality of life, psychosocial support, and pandemic-adapted care approaches. For example, studies investigating changes in the provision of palliative care services during the pandemic or assessing the impact of the pandemic on patient access to palliative care will be included

in our analysis. We will focus on studies published between January 2020 and September 2022 to ensure coverage of relevant and recent research related to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on palliative care. This period coincides with the onset of the pandemic and the period of interest in terms of major changes in palliative care delivery and access. We will only include studies published in English, as this is the primary language of communication in the scientific community and will facilitate accessibility and appropriate analysis of relevant data.

We excluded studies that did not directly address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on palliative care or that did not provide information relevant to our analysis. At the same time, studies published in a language other than English will not be included in this analysis. Studies published before January 2020 or after September 2022 will be excluded, as we want to focus on relevant and up-to-date information in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and palliative care.

The results of our systematic search of relevant databases resulted in the initial identification of 171 potentially relevant articles for our review. After removing duplicates, we were left with a total of 31 unique items. By screening the titles and abstracts, we excluded 20 articles that did not meet our inclusion criteria. We selected only articles that specifically focused on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on palliative care and that provided relevant and meaningful data. After applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria, we finally selected 4 articles [5,6,7,8] that met our criteria to be included in our systematic review. These articles are considered the most relevant and provide significant insight into the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on palliative care. The strategy used for all databases can be seen in figure 1.

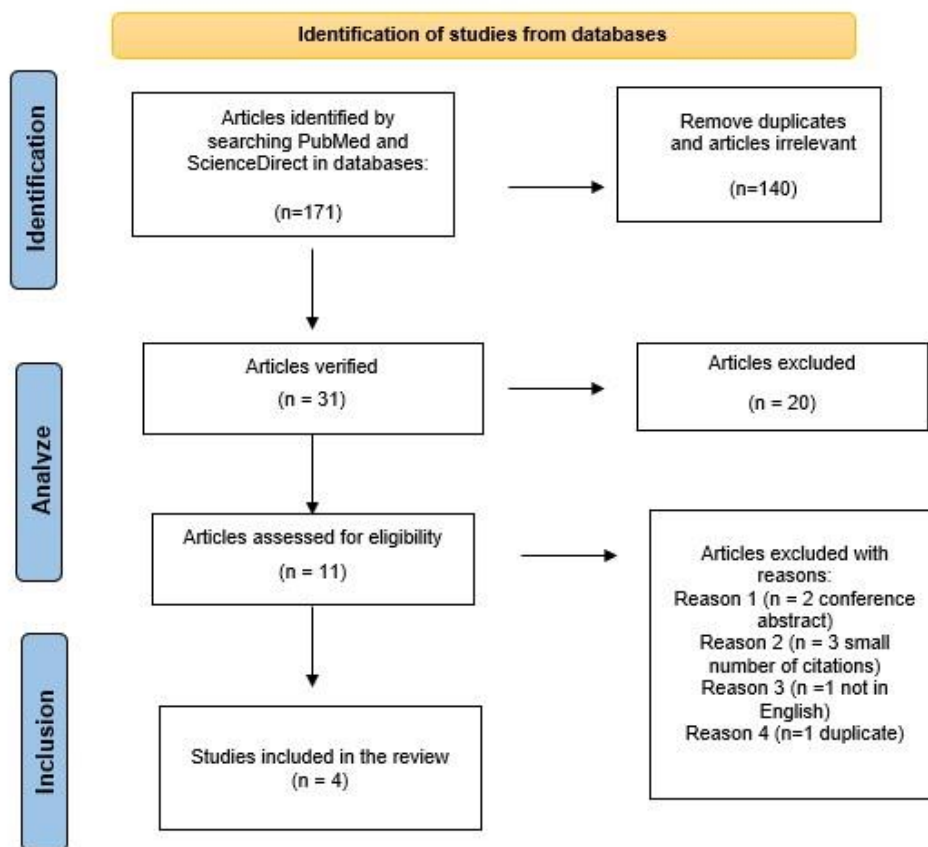


Figure 1 - The strategy for identifying relevant studies for the literature review

From Moher D, Liberati A, Tetzlaff J, Altman DG, The PRISMA Group. Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses: The PRISMA Statement. PLoS Med 2009;6(7):e1000097.

The available data from the full text of the four included studies was extracted into an excel file regarding the first author, year of publication, study objectives, research method, participants and main findings/results. This can be seen in Appendix 1.

Table 1 - Overview of the studies included in the systematic literature review

Authors	Year of publication	Study objectives	Research method	Participants	Main findings/results
Ersek et al.	2021	The impact of communication in end-of-life care in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic	Observational study	Patients	Effective communication influences the quality of end-of-life care in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic
Hugelius et.al	2021	The consequences of visiting restrictions in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic on patients and families	Review	Patients and their families	Visiting restrictions have had a negative impact on the comfort of patients and families during the pandemic
Caraceni A et al.	2022	The use of telemedicine in ambulatory palliative	Longitudinal study	Patients	The use of telemedicine in ambulatory palliative care has had positive results during the

		care during the COVID-19 pandemic			COVID-19 pandemic, facilitating patient access to services and providing continuous remote medical support
Chan et al.	2022	The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of palliative care professionals	Mixed study	Palliative care professionals	Palliative care professionals have reported increased levels of stress and fatigue during the pandemic

Results:

The article by Ersek et al. (2021) [5], emphasize the importance of communication during palliative care in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Pandemic restrictions have had a significant impact on interactions between patients, their families and palliative care professionals. Communication through technology has become an important way to stay in touch during this time. Palliative care professionals have used video conferencing and other technologies to provide support and counseling to patients and their families. However, it is important to note that the accessibility and quality of these interactions can be influenced by factors such as technical knowledge and access to appropriate equipment. The research highlights the need for clear and sensitive communication in the context of palliative care during the pandemic. Palliative care professionals must be able to provide emotional support and communicate clear and accurate information to patients and their families. End-of-life discussions and difficult decision-making can be more complex in a pandemic context, and the ability to communicate sensitively and empathetically becomes crucial. Even under the restrictions imposed by the pandemic, palliative care professionals must find effective ways to facilitate these discussions and provide the necessary support to patients and families in the decision-making process. The article also highlights the importance of collaboration and communication within the multidisciplinary palliative care team. Traditionally, palliative care involves an interdisciplinary approach, and effective communication between team members is essential. In the context of the pandemic, physical distancing restrictions and changes in the way of working have imposed the need to adapt the ways of communication and collaboration within the team. The use of technology and virtual tools can be useful to facilitate communication and coordination of efforts within the multidisciplinary palliative care team during the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, the results highlight the significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on communication in palliative care. To overcome the challenges generated by the pandemic, adaptation and innovation in ways of communication are needed to ensure quality care and the necessary support for patients and families during these difficult times.

The article by Hugelius et al. (2021) [6], outline the consequences of visiting restrictions in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic on palliative care. The restrictions imposed had a significant impact on patients and families, contributing to social isolation and separation from loved ones. This separation generated feelings of loneliness, anxiety and depression among patients, affecting their emotional well-being. Visiting restrictions also limited the emotional support

provided by loved ones, making it difficult to communicate and express affection. The funeral process and mourning rituals have also been affected, having a psychological impact on families and how they can cope with the loss. In addition to the impact on patients and families, healthcare staff and palliative care professionals experienced an additional level of stress and exhaustion in managing these restrictions and adapting to new ways of communicating and supporting. Thus, visiting restrictions have had significant effects on palliative care, highlighting the importance of finding alternative solutions to ensure support and connection during times of crisis and pandemic.

The study carried out by Caraceni et al. (2022) [7] focus on the use of telemedicine in ambulatory palliative care during the COVID-19 pandemic. Researchers investigated the effectiveness and experiences of patients and palliative care professionals in using this mode of remote care. The results of the study showed that telemedicine was a viable and effective option for providing ambulatory palliative care during the pandemic. Patients had access to medical consultations and counseling through virtual platforms, reducing the need to travel and the risk of exposure to the virus. The use of telemedicine has also facilitated continuous communication between patients and palliative care professionals, allowing them to provide support and respond to patients' needs in a prompt manner. In addition, the study highlighted the additional benefits of telemedicine in palliative care. This included reducing the costs associated with travel and hospitalization, removing the barrier of geographical distance and being able to involve family members in virtual consultations. Patients and families generally reported a positive experience using telemedicine, expressing satisfaction with accessibility, convenience, and quality of care. However, it is important to note that there are also challenges associated with the use of telemedicine in palliative care. These include the need to have technical skills and access to appropriate equipment, as well as limitations in physical examinations and personal interactions. However, the study highlights that telemedicine can represent a valuable and complementary way to provide ambulatory palliative care in crisis situations and restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

The study by Chan et al. (2021), [8] explore the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of palliative care professionals and services. Using a mixed-methods approach, the researchers examined both quantitative and qualitative aspects to gain a comprehensive understanding of the experiences and needs of these professionals. The results of the study highlighted the significant impact of the pandemic on the mental health of palliative care professionals. They

reported increased levels of stress, emotional exhaustion and anxiety. Challenges associated with the pandemic, such as overcrowding, overstressing the health care system and the risk of infection, have contributed to these negative effects. The study also highlighted the protective factors and coping strategies used by palliative care professionals to cope with the impact on mental health. These included support and collaboration within the team, effective communication and a patient-centred approach, self-care and the use of stress management techniques. The study also highlighted the protective factors and coping strategies used by palliative care professionals to cope with the impact on mental health. These included support and collaboration within the team, effective communication and a patient-centred approach, self-care and the use of stress management techniques. The study highlights the importance of providing adequate support and resources to palliative care professionals to address mental health issues. Promoting self-care, developing stress management strategies, and facilitating open and supportive communication within the team can help improve the psychological well-being of these professionals during times of crisis and pandemic. The results also highlight the need to develop mental health policies and programs tailored to the needs of palliative care professionals to provide the support and resources needed to meet the challenges of the pandemic and prevent burnout and burnout. It is crucial to implement appropriate support measures and interventions to protect and sustain the emotional well-being of these professionals, ensuring they can continue to provide quality care to patients and families during these difficult times.

Discussions:

Regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on palliative care, we can see from the analyzed results that it brought multiple challenges and changes in the approach and organization of palliative care. Because patients with COVID-19 are at high risk of death, it is important that they receive adequate palliative care if they cannot be successfully treated. During the COVID-19 pandemic, a rapid adaptation to the new requirements was necessary, including the use of telemedicine to reduce the risk of infection, the development of new care protocols to respond to emergency situations, as well as the improvement of communication methods between patients, their families and palliative care providers.

The COVID-19 pandemic represented a critical moment in the evolution of palliative care, requiring rapid and innovative adaptations. One of the significant aspects that resulted in this context was the extensive use of telemedicine. This way of providing remote healthcare has proven to be an effective solution in overcoming the obstacles created by the restrictions imposed by the pandemic. Through telemedicine, patients were able to benefit from consultations and care without being exposed to the risk of infection, especially those in isolated communities or those with mobility difficulties. Also, telemedicine allowed monitoring patients in real time and offering psychological support at a distance, contributing to maintaining a continuity of care services at an extremely difficult time.

It was also necessary to increase the availability and use of personal protective equipment to reduce the risk of infection of medical and care personnel. In many countries, special palliative care centers have been created for COVID-19 patients, with the aim of providing adequate care in safe and isolated conditions. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has

led to an increase in anxiety and stress among patients, families and palliative care providers, which has increased the need for emotional and social support. In this sense, special emotional support and therapy programs have been implemented to help patients and families cope with the situation.

At the same time, medical staff in palliative care services were overworked, both due to the increased number of COVID-19 patients and due to absences caused by infections or voluntary self-isolation. This led to a decline in the quality of palliative care, and many patients were left without access to the treatments and services they needed. It is clear that the pandemic has caused major disruption to palliative care services and adequate resources must be allocated to help them recover and improve over the long term.

In addition, the pandemic has had a significant impact on the provision of palliative care at home. Many patients who would have preferred to receive care at home, to be closer to family and avoid the risk of infection in hospitals or care centers, were forced to attend such centers due to lack of staff and of protective equipment at home. The patients in rural areas and socioeconomically disadvantaged communities had limited access to palliative care during the pandemic due to transportation barriers and lack of medical resources. This highlighted the importance of developing innovative solutions for the delivery of palliative care at home, including the use of remote monitoring technology and equipment.

Finally, the pandemic has accentuated the need to improve the interdisciplinary approach in the provision of palliative care. It is important to include medical, social work, psychological and spiritual professionals in the overall approach to palliative care to ensure that patients' needs are met in a holistic way. In addition, the pandemic has highlighted the need to provide adequate support to patients and their families during and after the palliative care process, including through counseling and access to psychological and spiritual resources.

Overall, our data suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the provision of palliative care, and adequate resources need to be allocated to help it recover and improve over the long term. It is important to consider the needs of patients and their families during the pandemic, and the interdisciplinary and innovative approach can help ensure appropriate and humane palliative care in a pandemic context.

Conclusions:

This systematic review examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on palliative care. The study identifies several changes brought about by the pandemic, including increased use of telemedicine for remote care, increased stress and anxiety among care providers and patients, restrictions on access to palliative care due to social distancing measures, and limitations on patient and family visits. The review emphasizes the need for ongoing efforts to improve access to palliative care and ensure adequate training of medical personnel to handle similar crisis situations in the future. The selected studies highlight the importance of effective communication in end-of-life care, negative consequences of visiting restrictions, the feasibility and satisfaction of telemedicine services, and the increased stress and fatigue experienced by palliative care professionals during the pandemic.

The use of telemedicine in palliative care during the COVID-19 pandemic brought with it multiple benefits and represented a solution adapted to the requirements imposed by the pandemic

situation. This way of providing medical services at a distance ensured accessibility to care, reducing geographical and mobility barriers. Telemedicine also offered a safe alternative for patients and medical staff, avoiding exposure to the risk of infection. Continuity of care was maintained and remote monitoring of patients helped to adjust and optimize treatment plans. In addition, the use of telemedicine has enabled the provision of psychological support at a distance, helping patients and families cope with the emotional difficulties generated by the pandemic.

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