

The relationship between spiritual well-being and quality of life in cancer patients

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Abstract

Introduction: Cancer has a significant impact on the patient not only physically, but also psycho-emotionally, socially and spiritually. Complications of the disease and treatment can lead to sleep disturbances, increased level of anxiety and various forms of depression and, consequently, to the decrease of the quality of life, one of the most important factors pursued in the palliative setting. Spirituality is an important segment of the suffering individual, its impact having a key role in the screening of psycho-emotional disorders in cancer patients. This dimension is the least studied due to the lack of clear definitions and the difficult quantification of the information received.

Material and Method: We conducted a literature review that aimed to identify the aspects related to spiritual well-being and quality of life in adults diagnosed with cancer and, also, the correlation of the two aspects. We used the PubMed database to identify the needed articles and we used the following keywords: cancer patients, quality of life, QoL, spiritual well-being, SWB. We selected the articles published between January 2015 and December 2023 and, out of 786 that we identified, we included 10 after analysis (literature reviews, observational studies, qualitative studies). Although the analyzed populations had diverse characteristics, varying from the stage of the disease to the religious confession, the obtained results support the relationship between the two aspects discussed.

Conclusion: Integrating the issue of spirituality and understanding spiritual needs are essential interventions in the approach to the cancer patient. Spiritual suffering is based on a wide panel of causes such as loneliness, fear, hopelessness or social isolation, and their relief can lead to a better quality of life for patients.

Keywords: cancer patients, quality of life, QoL, spirituality, spiritual well-being, SWB

Rezumat

Introducere: Patologia oncologică are un impact semnificativ asupra pacientului nu doar din punct de vedere fizic, dar și psiho-emoțional, social și spiritual. Complicațiile bolii și ale tratamentului pot conduce la tulburări de somn, nivel crescut de anxietate și diferite forme de depresie și, în consecință, la diminuarea calității vieții, unul dintre cei mai importanți factori urmăriți la pacienții tratați cu viză paliativă. Spiritualitatea reprezintă un pilon important al individului aflat în suferință, impactul asupra acesteia având un rol cheie în screeningul tulburărilor psiho-emoționale la pacienții neoplazici. Această dimensiune este cel mai puțin studiată din cauza lipsei unor definiții clare și a cuantificării dificile a informațiilor primite.

Material și metodă: Am efectuat un review de literatură care a avut ca scop identificarea aspectelor ce țin de bunăstarea spirituală și calitatea vieții la adulții diagnosticați cu patologie în sfera oncologică și corelarea celor două aspecte. Pentru căutarea articolelor am utilizat baza de date PubMed, iar pentru identificarea acestora am folosit următoarele cuvinte-cheie: cancer patients, quality of life, QoL, spiritual well-being, SWB. Am selectat articolele publicate în perioada Ianuarie 2015-Decembrie 2023 și, din 786 identificate, am inclus după analiză 10 (review-uri de literatură, studii observaționale, studii calitative). Deși populațiile analizate au avut caracteristici diverse, variind de la stadiul bolii la confesiunea religioasă, rezultatele obținute susțin raportul dintre cele două aspecte discutate.

Concluzie: Integrarea problemei spiritualității și înțelegerea nevoilor spirituale reprezintă intervenții esențiale în abordarea pacientului oncologic. Suferința spirituală are la bază un panel larg de cauze precum singurătatea, teama, lipsa speranței sau izolarea socială, iar ameliorarea acestora poate conduce la o calitate mai bună a vieții pacienților.

Cuvinte cheie: pacient oncologic, calitatea vieții, bunăstare spirituală, QoL, spiritualitate

Introduction

The increasing incidence of cancer worldwide poses a real threat to quality of life and public health. Oncologic pathology has a significant impact on the individual not only physically, but also psycho-emotionally, socially and spiritually. [1] Both cancer and the complications of the disease and its treatment can lead to sleep disturbances, increased levels of anxiety and various forms of depression and, consequently, to a decreased quality of life. It is important to bear in mind that improving

quality of life is one of the most important factors that are being pursued in palliative care patients. [2]

Spirituality is an important pillar of the suffering individual, and its role becomes all the more relevant the more the patient is aware that the disease is incurable and that the therapeutic resources available to him or her are on the verge of exhaustion. [1] Perception of the meaning of life refers to an understanding of its meaning and purpose, while peace is the sense of reconciliation with the unpleasant events that the

individual is experiencing, and faith refers to the inner comfort and strength that comes from religious beliefs. [1]
 The National Comprehensive Cancer Network (NCCN) guidelines identify spiritual distress as having a key role in screening for psycho-emotional distress in neoplastic patients. However, this area also appears to be the most understudied and this is due to the lack of clear definitions and the difficult quantification of the information received. It is also widely accepted that addressing religiosity and spirituality requires assessment across multiple dimensions, including the beliefs and practices of the patient's religious community, the patient's experiences, the concept of the search for meaning, and the connection to self, others and sacredness, as defined by the National Consensus Project (NCP) for Quality Palliative Care. [3]

Over the last two decades, several researchers have studied the relation between spirituality, clinical status and quality of life in patients with cancer. They have tried to identify the relation between spiritual orientation and improved quality of life based on the hypothesis that patients facing an incurable disease are trying to address several spiritual needs such as the search for meaning in life or the fulfilment of the relationship with oneself and others. There is evidence that improving this aspect leads to a better quality of life, maintenance of psychological and social functioning, and reduction of depression and anxiety associated with neoplastic disease. On the other hand, unfulfilled spiritual needs lead to a decrease in referrals to hospice palliative care services and increased health care costs for terminally ill cancer patients. [2]

Despite scientific studies that have demonstrated the benefit of spiritual assessment of oncologic patients, these needs are not fully supported by health professionals. If the spiritual needs of patients with a limited prognosis in the medium and short term are largely unmet, they face a high level of distress on a daily basis which not only negatively influences their psycho-emotional well-being, but also affects their ability to make decisions about their health. [4]

It is important for health professionals to understand the concept of spiritual well-being from the patient's perspective as it could be an important factor in patient care, in order to fully explore and understand the complexity and different facets of spiritual well-being. [5]

Purpose of the literature review

Spiritual well-being is an important dimension of quality of life in palliative oncology patients which is why health

professionals should understand this concept from their point of view. The aim of this literature review is to identify aspects of spiritual well-being and quality of life in adults diagnosed with oncologic pathology.

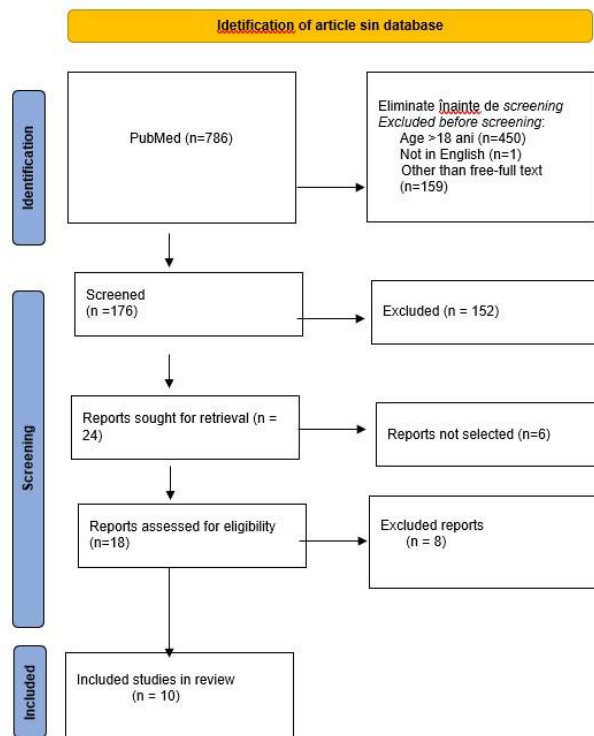
Research question

Can high levels of spiritual well-being correlate with improved quality of life in cancer patients?

Search method

The PubMed database was used to search for articles and the following keywords were used to identify articles: "cancer patients", "quality of life" (QoL), "spirituality well-being" (SWB). Articles published in English between January 2015-December 2023 were selected and a total of 786 articles were identified.

Prisma Diagram



Tabel 1. Table with included studies

Authors	Title	Topic	Design	Sample	Comments
Almaraz et al (6)	What Aspects of Religion and Spirituality Affect the Physical Health of Cancer Patients? A Systematic Review	Relația dintre spiritualitate/religiozitate și starea de sănătate la pacientul oncologic The relation between spirituality/religiosity and health status in oncology patients	Literature review		Several aspects have been identified that are correlated with spiritual well-being such as reduced anxiety or pain relief.
Bai&Lanzenby (7)	A Systematic Review of Associations between Spiritual Well-Being and	Relația dintre bunăstarea spirituală și calitatea vieții la adulții diagnosticați cu cancer	Literature review		Strong and independent association between spiritual well-being and quality of life,

	Quality of Life at the Scale and Factor Levels in Studies among Patients with Cancer	The relation between spiritual well-being and quality of life in adults diagnosed with cancer Strong and independent association between spiritual well-being and quality of life, especially in relation to 'meaning' and 'peace' factors			especially in relation to 'meaning' and 'peace' factors
Cheng et al (8)	Improving spiritual well-being among cancer patients: implications for clinical care	Exploring factors associated with spiritual well-being in cancer patients and its relation to quality of life	Cross-sectional study	200 participants	Finding meaning and peace was significantly correlated with improved quality of life
Dabo et al (9)	Spiritual Well-Being for Croatian Cancer Patients: Validation and Applicability of the Croatian Version of the EORTC QLQ-SWB32	Validation and evaluation of the use of the EORTC QLQ-SWB32 questionnaire in the Croatian population	Observational study	147 participants	Comparisons between the target groups found statistically significant differences for participants, in the scores recorded on some scales for gender, age, cancer stage and religious affiliation.
Kyranou et al (10)	Associations between the spiritual well-being (EORTC QLQ-SWB32) and quality of life (EORTC QLQ-C30) of patients receiving palliative care for cancer in Cyprus	To identify levels of spiritual well-being, quality of life and potential associations between the two in Cypriot patients with advanced cancer receiving palliative care	Observational, cross-sectional study	104 participants	Results showed a mean reported score for 'Overall spiritual well-being', high scores on the scales 'Relationship with others' and 'Relationship with God'
Zare et al (2)	The relationship between spiritual well-being, mental health, and quality of life in cancer patients receiving chemotherapy	Association between spiritual well-being, psycho-emotional status and quality of life	Observational, cross-sectional study	208 participants	The results showed the directly proportional correlation between level of spiritual well-being and quality of life.
Sun et al (3)	Palliative care and spiritual well-being in lung cancer patients and family caregivers	The multidimensionality of spiritual well-being includes items such as meaning and belief for lung cancer patients regardless of religious affiliations.	Cross-sectional study	829 participants	The study followed the relation between quality of life and spiritual well-being in patients diagnosed with non-small cell lung neoplasm and treated with both, curative and palliative intent.
Martins et al (11)	Spiritual Well-Being in Cancer Patients Undergoing Chemotherapy in an Outpatient Setting	Assessing the spiritual well-being of cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy on an outpatient basis.	Cross-sectional study	150 participants	Significant correlation in gender - women had higher mean scores of spiritual well-being in the community and transcendental domains
Phenwan et al (12)	The Meaning of Spirituality and Spiritual Well-Being among Thai Breast	Identifying the relation between spiritual well-being and quality of life.	Qualitative study, interview	16 participants	All study participants were women. Some of them reported that their connection with the divine was

	Cancer Patients: A Qualitative Study				strengthened with their cancer diagnosis.
Rohde et al (5)	Spiritual Well-being in Patients with Metastatic Colorectal Cancer Receiving Noncurative Chemotherapy	Assessment of spiritual well-being in patients with colorectal cancer receiving palliative care. Themes were identified such as building inner harmony and sharing feelings with others, existential problems such as end-of-life ideation or those belonging to the category of the relationship with the religious community or the strict connection with the divinity such as the search for faith as inner support.	Qualitative study	20 participants	Identified themes: building inner harmony and sharing feelings with others, existential problems such as end-of-life ideation or those belonging to the category of the relationship with the religious community or the strict connection with the divinity, such as the search for faith as inner support.

In a 2023 systematic literature review that included 26 studies, more than half of which were conducted in the US, one in Europe, and one was international, encompassing centres in several states, Almaraz et al aimed to identify the relation between spirituality and the health status of cancer patients. Of these, seven followed a specific oncologic condition, and in one, the types of neoplasms were not mentioned. FACIT-Sp12 or EORTC QLQ-SWB32 questionnaires were used in some of the studies included in the review. They identified several aspects that correlate with spiritual well-being such as reduced anxiety or pain relief. [6]

Another literature review covering 36 studies attempted to identify the relation between spiritual well-being and quality of life. A strong and independent association between the two was identified, especially in relation to the levels of the factors 'meaning' and 'peace'. They also found correlations between improved quality of life and views of existential status or mental health. In a cross-over study of 200 cancer patients, it was found that finding meaning and peace correlated significantly with improved quality of life. Moreover, high positive scores on the peace scale correlated with physical, psychological and social well-being. [7]

An observational study aimed at validating and evaluating the use of the EORTC QLQ-SWB32 questionnaire in the Croatian population identified differences between target groups and found statistically significant differences for participants in scores recorded on some scales in relation to gender, age, cancer stage and religious affiliation. [8]

Kyranou et al's study is among the few of its kind conducted in a predominantly Orthodox population, given that most studies of this type originate from either Asia or the United States. Importantly, the mean score on the EORTC QLQ-SWB32 was associated with the mean scores on the EORTC QLQ-C30 assessment of emotional and cognitive functions. [9]

In a cross-sectional study of 208 Muslim oncology patients undergoing chemotherapy who responded to the Paloutzian and Ellison spiritual well-being questionnaire and the DASS-21 questionnaire for the assessment of psycho-emotional status, the directly proportional correlation between the level of spiritual well-being, psycho-emotional status (these patients experienced fewer negative emotions) and quality of life was identified. [10]

In a prospective, interventional study that looked at the relationship between quality of life and spiritual well-being in patients diagnosed with non-small lung cancer and treated with both, curative and palliative care, and their family members, researchers sought to observe improvements in quality of life in relation to spiritual well-being for which they received support from a team of specialists, in regular meetings. At the 12-week assessment, a spiritual improvement was observed compared to the data obtained before enrolment in the study. Besides, the data showed that patients who did not belong to a religious community had better outcomes in terms of their relationship with themselves, suggesting that these patients could also benefit from this type of intervention. [2] In another study, a significant gender correlation was identified - women had higher mean scores of spiritual well-being in the community and transcendental domains (relationship with others and relationship with God). There were also significant differences between religious profile and level of spiritual well-being, with patients with evangelical community affiliation showing higher scores than Catholics and agnostics. [10] From a qualitative interview study with 16 breast cancer patients, it is mentioned that, in relation to the sacre, the participants stated that their faith was tested by the diagnose with neoplastic disease and their connection with divinity was strengthened with it. Some of the Buddhist patients mentioned that their diagnosis was nothing more than the effect of karma, suggesting that it was a consequence of past actions. [11] Another qualitative interview study conducted in Norway with 20 patients diagnosed with metastatic colorectal cancer undergoing chemotherapy, in which the interview followed the three broad domains of spiritual well-being as defined by the EORTC, several derived themes were identified: such as building inner harmony and sharing experiences and feelings with others, existential issues such as end-of-life ideation or those related to the relationship with the religious community, or a close connection with the divine such as seeking faith as an inner support. [12]

Discussions

According to the data presented above, we can state that there is a correlation between spiritual well-being and the level of quality of life in patients diagnosed with cancer. Spirituality is

an important pillar of support during the individual suffering, and its role becomes more relevant when the patient is aware of the fact that the disease has an incurable status and that the therapeutic resources are limited. Spiritual suffering is based on a wide panel of causes such as loneliness, anxiety, fear, anger, guilt, lack of hope, oneself image, loss of role in the family and in society, lack of autonomy, lack of support from those around, the relationship with God or social isolation. [4] If the spiritual needs of patients with a limited medium and short-term prognosis are largely unmet, they face a high level of suffering on a daily basis that not only affects them negatively from a psycho-emotional point of view, but it also affects their ability to make decisions about their health status. [13] Spiritual suffering is a significant source of suffering for many cancer patients, especially those who perceive their situation as serious. Being reconciled is a key element of not being in spiritual distress and could be a focus in research when exploring spirituality. [14]

Conclusions

It would be preferable the approach in the care of the patient diagnosed with cancer to be based on the bio-psycho-socio-spiritual model. The attention given to the spiritual dimension constitutes an approach that involves the orientation of the professional in the health domain towards two directions: internal (compassion, care, active listening, creating psycho-emotional comfort) and external (strategies to deal with the difficulties encountered, inducing hope). Integrating the issue of spirituality and understanding spiritual needs are essential interventions to provide holistic care.

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