

Palliative Care as an Emerging Role for Respiratory Health Professionals

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Introduction

Respiratory Health Professionals (RHPs) with specialty training in the management of asthma and COPD, often care for patients with advanced respiratory disease, who have less access to palliative care than patients with similar disease burden.

The aims of this study were to:

1. explore the current and desired roles of RHPs in terms of palliative care
2. examine barriers to discussions with patients about palliative care

METHODS

An online survey was developed, and pilot tested. The survey was distributed nationally using the database of the Lung Association's RESPTREC respiratory educator training program. Descriptive statistics were performed.

RESULTS

A total of 123 completed surveys were returned, with respiratory therapists (70.7%) comprising the largest group of respondents.

The majority indicated that end-of-life care was less than optimal for patients with advanced respiratory illnesses and agreed that palliative care should be a role of RHPs.

Patient-and family-related barriers to having end-of-life discussions included:

- difficulty accepting prognosis
- limitations and complications
- lack of capacity

The most important provider barriers were:

- lack of training
- uncertainty about prognosis
- lack of time

The health care system barriers:

- increased demand for palliative services
- limited accessibility of palliative care for those with advanced respiratory diseases
- difficulties in accurate prognostication for these conditions

DISCUSSION

Incorporating a more defined role in palliative care was generally seen as a desirable evolution of the RHP role.

Several strategies to mitigate identified barriers to discussions with the patient are described.

Better alignment of the services required with the needs of patients with advanced respiratory disease can be addressed in a number of ways.

CONCLUSIONS

- The quality of care for patients with advanced disease can be enhanced by integrating principles of palliative care into chronic disease management.
- Many RHPs already work in interdisciplinary teams, they can take on leadership roles in promoting the need for palliative care on their services.
- RHPs can help to address the gaps in care identified in this exploratory survey, including limited access to palliative care and difficult transitions through collaboration, training, and research.



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