Reviewer's report

Title: Psychological processes that uninformed middle-aged, hospitalized, male Japanese cancer patients experience in resigned to death: in-depth interview study

Version: 2 Date: 30 January 2006

Reviewer: Christine McPherson

Reviewer's report:

General

This paper describes a qualitative study exploring the psychological processes of terminal ill patients with liver cancer, who are not informed of their disease, from hospitalization up until death. Research into this area is important in informing those involved in the care of the patient of the likely psychological sequel and reactions to not being informed of the gravity of one’s illness and impending death.

Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

Background

The authors make reference to the attitudes of doctors toward informing patients of their disease but do not put this within the context of the prevailing societal norms in Japan regarding self-determination and disclosure of medical information.

There is scant reference to the psychological literature relating to the reactions of individuals to diagnosis and impending death. There is also a literature on death anxiety, which would fit with the results of the study.

The authors state the purpose of the study is “to examine the psychological processes of uniformed terminal cancer patients until death”. However, the significance of this purpose is not clearly stated.

Methods

Given the nature of the research participants were not made aware of the actual reason for the study. This brings many ethical issues regarding the research that are not addressed by the authors. For example, informed consent and how the interviewers dealt with this ethical dilemma within the context of the interview?

The interviewers did not ask questions but listened. How did the interviewers explore issues raised by participants in more detail or clarify their understanding of what participants were saying?

The authors talk of theoretical sampling but it is not clear whether and how this was carried out.

The methodological procedures are not clear and need to be rewritten to improve clarity.

The sentence at the end of the third paragraph of this section “Taking correlation..” does not make sense within the context of the analysis.
The fourth paragraph in the methods section contains the findings before the reader had reached the Results section. This is confusing for the reader.

There needs to be more transparency in the methods section in relation to the interviewers/researchers backgrounds and how this might influence their interpretations.

Results

The findings are presented in a stepwise fashion, where all participants progressed through the stages, experiencing the same emotions at particular times following their hospitalization. If there was variability in the process, this should be included.

The authors suggest that as participants went through one gate into another gate the psychological conditions (feelings and behaviours) in the preceding gate came to an end. Yet on reading the data presented participants were clearly demonstrating certain feelings such as anxiety throughout various stages.

Analyzing the data, the authors make interpretations that are not supported by the data presented. For instance, section 3.2.1 the comment “We suggest that while they had vague feelings that death might arrive sometime in the near future, they were not clearly conscious of it”. Again, in section 3.5 the authors discuss the finding that the participants no longer talked about death and looked active and lively. The authors state that “Based on this evidence, the interviewer found that patients had come to terms with their own death at this stage”.

Discussion

The discussion is not based in current theory (as mentioned in the introduction revisions)

What are the implications of the findings?

In paragraph 4 of this section who are the informed patients that the authors are comparing their uninformed participants with? Also in this paragraph the sentence referring to attitudes to death- the source is not identified.

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Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

Background

In paragraph 2- the sentence regarding a survey from the Statistics and Information Department (references 9 & 10), is not clear.

Discussion

The authors suggest that the interviewer might have pushed participants through the stages. This needs to be elaborated.

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Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

The results section is too long and may lose the reader.
What next?: Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

Statistical review: No

Declaration of competing interests:
I declare that I have no competing interests