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Palliative Care Association of Grenada

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Weekly Newsletter

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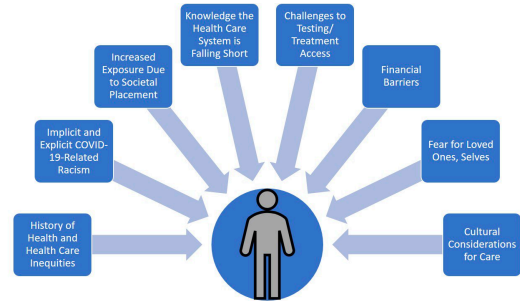
Increasing Access to Palliative Care for Patients Who are Homeless

“Our prime purpose in this life is to help others and if you can’t help them, at least don’t hurt them”

-Dalai Lama

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), palliative care is defined as “an approach that improves the quality of life of patients and their families facing the problems associated with life-threatening illness, through the prevention and relief of suffering by means of early identification and impeccable assessment and treatment of pain and other problems, physical, psychosocial and spiritual”. While this definition covers a broad range of domains, it remains challenging to apply it to all populations including those patients who are homeless.

Homeless people are those that do not have permanent housing. Many studies have reported that homeless people have a higher incidence of substance abuse problems, mental illnesses, serious physical illnesses, lack of social support, and lack of health insurance. Additionally, their life expectancy tends to be lower than that of the general population. Evidently, a large proportion of the homeless population stands to benefit from the services provided through palliative care; however, many obstacles stand in the way of them receiving this care.



A recent systematic review determined that there are many concerns that the homeless population as a whole harbours about palliative care. One main concern was the attitude and behaviours of healthcare professionals, specifically regarding being treated with respect and dignity. Other barriers related to healthcare professionals included lack of knowledge and skills of the professionals as well as the organization of care, and minimal attempts to build a patient-physician relationship. Additionally, the review identified many other barriers to receiving palliative care in the homeless population such as living on a day-to-day basis and end-of-life care not being a priority, absence of support from family members, and having limited insights about their own health.

As future healthcare professionals and advocates for equity of healthcare, it is the duty of all medical students to become more educated about palliative care as a whole in addition to areas where it is lacking. We must first educate ourselves and then focus on improving gaps in the healthcare system to be able to address this problem from the roots. It is also important to make attempts to increase awareness and education within the homeless population itself, so the patients are more likely to seek the help they need. One way to accomplish this would be to partner social services with the end-of-life care system, in an effort to improve the accessibility and availability of palliative care services to the homeless population.



References

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