A Better Understanding of the Psychological Suffering of Elderly Men with Incurable Cancer: A Health Care Professionals’ Perspective

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The Sufferings of Elderly Men with Incurable Cancer

• The sufferings and the experience of being sick with an incurable cancer: beyond the pain, what are the sufferings experienced by them?
• Incurable cancer and elderly men: 62% of cancer deaths occur in people aged 70 years and older (Canadian Cancer Society, 2015)
• The law on medical aid in dying and suffering

What do we know about the sufferings of elderly men with incurable cancer?
THEORETICAL REFERENCES

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A few thoughts on death

- Denial and fascination toward death
- Valorization of autonomy, individualism, productivity, and immediacy.

The accompaniment and the end of life
- An ethical stand
- A valorization of speech and exchange
- Denial and fascination with death

(Byock, 2002; Chatel, 2010; Des Aulniers, 2012; Des Aulniers 1997; Jacquemin, 2002; Rossi, 2010)
Suffering

Suffering (Ricoeur, 1994):

« (...) the awareness of a limitation of oneself with respect to oneself, as with others. A consciousness realizing that what it lives, the state in which it finds itself causes limitation of itself and impotence» (Abiven, 1994, p.206)
« (When) the reflective capacity of speaking, doing, telling and to withdraw oneself from some actions in which the person is the author, is affected, there lie the borders of suffering. Therefore, the complaint is set in the open space of the gap between wanting-to-say and the powerlessness to say and to express self, according to Ricoeur » (Gilbert, 2007, p.75)
Cancer and suffering

• **Psychological suffering** versus pain (Ricoeur, 1994).

• Different forms of psychological distress (Ravi et al., 2012, Rand et al., 2012).

• Multiplication of losses (Caron et al., 2007; Kuuppelomäki, 1998).

• Violence inherent to the disease and its treatments (Lussier, Daneault, 2005).
Sufferings of elderly men with cancer

• The loss of control (Canham, 2009)

• Fear of losing its role as a provider of the family, financial fears (Chapple and Ziebland, 2002 in: Pudrovskka 2010, Cecil et al., 2010).

But what happens when cancer is incurable?
Masculinities, suffering and incurable cancer

- Traditional gendered roles and obstacles as men age.

- Masculinity and the experience of suffering from cancer.

(Charmaz, 1995; Pudrovska, 2010).
Methodology

Qualitative research

• 5 Focus groups

• Professionals (n=27)

• Thematic analysis (Paillé and Mucchielli, 2012).

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## Sociodemographic data

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RESULTS

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Results

• Three major issues of communication linked to the suffering of older men with incurable cancer:
  – 1) the complex dynamics of silence and verbal expression;
  – 2) the diverse manifestations and functions of denial and its impact on communication;
  – 3) The gaps between the visions of communication in men suffering from a incurable cancer and their Health care providers.
The complex dynamics of silence and verbal expression:

"And many of these men have difficulty expressing themselves ... their feelings ... their fears too ... they are really locked in ... and that also causes sometimes (like) a small conflict between the spouses ... because, you know, she wants to try to understand what he is experiencing but he is too reserved to talk about it. So it feels like a loss of control ... vis-a-vis the patient who is living with his disease. »

« just last week my patient (...) he was sleeping and I woke' em up and he cried and he just said "I don't know how to say goodbye to my family" »
The complex dynamics of silence and verbal expression

• Silence that can be called to be broken when death approaches:

• « (When) they have children, its... Like, in my case it wasn't so much (preparing) 'em... It was hiding 'em... Like: "Everything is fine, everything is fine". And then... Like, at the last few weeks, it was like, "Oh god, now we have to tell them everything", you know. We've been saying everything is fine, and it's not fine, you know. »
The manifold manifestations and functions of denial and its impact on communication

« It was very difficult to approach it (with) him, you know... (We) would try to be non threatening and just ask... " (What) did the oncologist say?...Were you given an idea of what to expect?... Is there a prognosis?". Or something like that, but, you know, it's difficult to... to discuss it with somebody who is not at all there. (...) : ... Not on the page at all.”
The differences between the visions of communication in elderly men with incurable cancer and in their health care providers

- Speech and silence
- For caregivers: an over-valued communication?

"(...) : I think there is a suffering that can be inflicted by the caregiver too ... and you have to pay attention to that... "Here is paradise"... Then I think of the whole idea of the good death... we always think that people should die in a specific context and in a specific manner... that they absolutely have to settled things in advance, that they must have spoken to their relatives ... holding hands... weeping a little, but not too much... and I think that sometimes in our interventions... I hope not very often but that patients can feel that they do not correspond to a kind of ideal that we have..."You should talk to your wife ... You should settle that ... you should ...".
Conclusion

• The “incapacity to say” and suffering
• A reflection on speech in elderly men with incurable cancer
• Rethinking masculinities (Gough, 2013)
• Next steps...

THANK YOU
Questions ?

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