

Hospice and Palliative Care: Development and Challenges in China

Yijin Wu, MD, Linzi Li, MD, Hang Su, MD, PhD, Xueli Yao, MD, PhD, and Ma Wen, MD, PhD



© iStock.com/sturti

Background: Terminally ill patients can benefit from palliative care, including relief from physical and emotional suffering, improved quality of life, and longer survival rates. However, despite marked development in other countries, palliative care is still in its infancy in China.

Objectives: The general population and healthcare professionals in China have yet to realize the importance of palliative care services. This article describes the status of palliative care services in China, the historic development of palliative care, and the barriers to its advancement.

Methods: The status quo of hospice and palliative care in China is reviewed, and suggestions are provided on how nurses can improve their abilities to care for patients with cancer at the end of life.

Findings: A significant amount of work is needed in China to meet the standards of international palliative care societies. Palliative care training for nurses is still very limited. Nurses and other health providers who are engaged in palliative care should be well trained regarding the principles and procedures of palliative care to ensure quality care.

Yijin Wu, MD, is a doctoral candidate in the Center for Clinical Neurolinguistics at Shandong University in Jinan; Linzi Li, MD, is an attending doctor in the Department of Gynecology and Obstetrics at the Tancheng Maternal and Child Health Hospital in Linyi; Hang Su, MD, PhD, is a postdoctoral researcher at the School of Foreign Languages at Beihang University; and Xueli Yao, MD, PhD, is a lecturer and Ma Wen, MD, PhD, is a professor, both in the Center for Clinical Neurolinguistics at Shandong University, all in China. The authors take full responsibility for the content of the article. The research was funded by a grant (IFYT 1508) from Innovation Foundation of Young Talent Team at Shandong University. The content of this article has been reviewed by independent peer reviewers to ensure that it is balanced, objective, and free from commercial bias. No financial relationships relevant to the content of this article have been disclosed by the independent peer reviewers or editorial staff. Wen can be reached at mawen@sdu.edu.cn, with copy to editor at CJONEditor@ons.org. (Submitted January 2015. Revision submitted March 2015. Accepted for publication May 16, 2015.)

Key words: cancer; palliative care; China; developments; challenges

Digital Object Identifier: 10.1188/16.CJON.E16-E19

Palliative care is a multidisciplinary approach to health care for terminally ill patients, the purpose of which is to provide patients with relief from pain and physical and/or mental stress caused by a serious illness—whatever the diagnosis (Adler, Goldfinger, Kalman, Park, & Meier, 2009). The overarching aim of such treatment is to improve the quality of life for patients and their families. Generally speaking, palliative care can improve health-related quality of life in three ways: (a) relieving physical and emotional suffering, (b) improving and strengthening the process of doctor–patient and nurse–patient communication and decision making, and (c) ensuring coordinated and continuous care across multiple healthcare settings (e.g., hospital, home, hospice, long-term care facility) (Khosla, Patel, & Sharma, 2012).

China is the most populous country in the world, with roughly 1.37 billion people (Infoplease, 2015), and has the largest low–middle class in the world. Cancer causes 21% of all deaths in China (McNamee, 2014). It has long been recognized that palliative care provides better pain management and symptom control for patients with advanced illness in developed

countries. Unfortunately, aggressive treatment of patients with advanced-stage cancer is prevalent in China, which largely results from the influence of traditional Chinese cultural values and ethics. This poses problems for the development of palliative care in China; therefore, this article aims to present a comprehensive discussion of the historic background, the current developments, and the challenges faced in the context of palliative care in China.

History of Palliative Care in China

In China, hospice and palliative care is an emerging specialty. In 1988, the first research center for palliative care was established in Tianjin Medical University. This was followed two years later by the first hospice and palliative facility. One of the most important steps in the development of palliative care was the establishment of the Chinese Association for Hospice and Palliative Care in 1993; this can be considered as a milestone in the history of palliative care in China. Three years later, the *Chinese Journal of Hospice and Palliative Care* was founded,