



Letter to Editor

Neglected Parental Role Among Iranian Parents with Cancer: Unveiling Social Aspects of Palliative Care

Cancer is 1 of the major health problems worldwide, and its incidence has decreased compared to previous decades.¹ Although cancer mostly affects older people, several cases are diagnosed in younger individuals who may be parents of young children. For patients with children under 18 years old, parenthood plays an important role in providing physical and emotional care and support for their children.² cancer diagnosis and its subsequent treatments disrupt family routines, structures, and dynamics. Parents with the disease face unique challenges as they must balance managing the disease with their caregiving responsibilities, including parenting.³ In Iranian culture, where the family holds a special place socially, religiously, and culturally, and parenthood is considered an important value and identity, this issue becomes more prominent.⁴

Patients face various symptoms such as decreased mood, energy, and memory, which, along with psychological experiences and impaired caregiving performance, affect their interaction with the child.⁵ Therefore, the threat of the parental role due to physical limitations and mental burden caused by the disease has been reported by these parents.⁴ Since the word cancer is still associated with stigma in Iran, many parents hide their illness from others, because of the fear of their children's future.⁶ and they can't talk to their children about their diagnosis and treatment.^{3,7} Therefore, 1 of their major concerns is the unmet needs of their children.⁸

This concern starts from the time of cancer diagnosis and increases during the treatment due to the progressive process of the disease and as a result, not having enough time and energy to take care of the children,⁹ especially for parents experiencing advanced or end-of-life stages, as they worry about how their illness and death will impact their children.¹⁰

Considering the goal of palliative care, which is to improve the quality of life the patient and the family,¹¹ the concept of parenting concerns is an important need in the social dimension of palliative care.¹² Many patients feel that their concerns have not received enough attention from healthcare providers.¹³ However, palliative care team plays an important role in addressing the unmet needs of patients during treatment.¹⁴ In the 6-step guideline, Rauch et al. presented the actions needed in dealing with cancer patients who also have the role of parents. These steps include: (1) Understanding the temperament and how children adapt and react to their parents' illness, (2) Establishing a support system for the child and getting help from family and friends to follow up on the children's activities and maintain their routine. (3) Facilitating communication based on trust and appropriate to the child's age, (4) Helping parents to answer common questions and understand the real questions of the child, (5) Preparing the child to meet the parents, (6) Helping the mourning process in children and saying goodbye.¹⁵

Although in Iran, the family support system is considered a strong point for continuing the routine of life and supporting children¹⁶ but, the implementation of the steps of Rauch et al.'s care model is accompanied by obstacles. Due to the stigma of cancer, many parents are unable to establish a trusting relationship with their children and answer their children's questions.⁶ Also, in the policy of visiting program in Iranian hospitals, children under the age of 12 are prohibited from visiting patients. If they are over 12 years old, they are allowed to see their sick parents only during limited visiting hours (maximum 2 hours a day). Since most deaths occur in the hospital, children are deprived of even the last goodbye to their parents.¹⁷ In this situations, parents feel that they have not fulfilled their parental role well and feel guilty.¹⁸

Palliative and supportive care are new approaches in Iran's health system, still in its early stages.^{11,19} Thus, the main focus is currently on the physical and sometimes psychological dimensions of patient care. Consequently, the social health dimensions of palliative care are neglected, regardless of the patient's role. Those interested in this field should therefore emphasize the concerns of cancer patients who are also parents as a crucial aspect of psycho-oncology care, addressing their challenges to enhance the quality of life which is the ultimate goal of palliative care.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

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CRediT authorship contribution statement

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