

Unmet Psychological Needs and Support Service Uptake of Patients with Cancer

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Dear Editor,

Cancer is a leading cause of morbidity and mortality worldwide. Patients with cancer frequently endure psychological distress. In Ireland, psycho-social support is “essential” in the care of cancer patients and survivors according to the National Cancer Strategy 2017-2026¹. Several community lead organisations run support services e.g., Cork ARC Support House, who provide counselling and support to patients.

Review of the international literature has noted some benefits to support services, but long-term benefits remain unclear². The lack of good quality quantitative studies, in particular randomised control trials, using validated assessment instruments is responsible for this knowledge gap. To assess this issue, we evaluated the needs of patients with cancer attending and not attending community cancer support services.

Patients from three tertiary healthcare facilities (n=180); CUH, MUH, SIVUH and two support centres (n=26); Cork ARC Cancer Support House (Cork city and Bantry) were recruited for a cross-sectional, questionnaire-based study. Information collected included sociodemographic data, participant psychological unmet needs³, participation levels in cancer support services, benefits and barriers associated with use of support services and clinical data.

The majority of patients, 162 (90%), identified one unmet psychological need. The most common were 'Concerns about the worries of those close to you', 124 (69%) and 'Fears about cancer spreading'/'Fears about cancer returning', both 16 (62%), for the hospital and support group respectively. 18 (10%) hospital participants and one (4%) support group participant experienced no unmet psychological needs.

Thirty-two (18%) hospital patients participated in cancer support groups. Counselling was the most popular service and was accessed by 59% of attendees. All patients attending support services cited at least one benefit of attendance. The top 3 benefits were 'Improved psychological well-being', 'Enhanced coping', and 'Supplying moral support' for 135 (75%), 113 (63%) and 101 (56%) participants respectively. The most prevalent barrier to participation was 'I don't want to participate in group situations', 29 (16%). Breast cancer was the most prevalent cancer diagnosis of those surveyed 84 (47%).

This study demonstrated that a high level of psychological needs was present in patients with cancer in our community. An important resource to address these needs are charitable organisations, such as Cork ARC Cancer Support House. Attendance has been shown to provide benefits including better coping mechanisms and psychological well-being. Considering the benefits associated with participation and with clinical guidelines recommending such support services, attendance is still relatively low (18%).

The study was conducted before the Covid 19 pandemic and likely underestimates the current prevalence of unmet psychological needs ⁴. There is currently an increased number of online support services, available through many support centres, including Cork ARC cancer support house. This is in response to the emergence of SARS CoV2. Future studies will need to factor in the changing landscape of support services in response to this global pandemic.

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