‘Symptom Control Trials in Patients with Advanced Cancer: A Qualitative Study’: Article Critique

Name

Institution Affiliation

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Middlemiss, T., Lloyd-Williams, M., Laird, B., & Fallon, M. (2015). Symptom Control Trials in Patients with Advanced Cancer: A Qualitative Study. *Journal of Pain and Symptom Management*, *50*(5), 642-649.e1. doi:10.1016/j.jpainsymman.2015.05.009

Article Summary

At its core, this article is an exploration of the effect that conducting symptom control trials in advanced cancer patients has on improving the quality of life and care that patients have as they battle their terminal illness. While its intentions are pure and genuine in their own right, the issue of conducting symptom control trials on patients with advanced terminal illnesses has long been controversial, and in some cases almost considered unethical or 'taboo'. Seeing as palliative care is an important aspect in the lives of patients with terminal illnesses such as advanced cancer, this study was aimed at examining the impacts that participating in symptom-controlled trials has on advanced cancer patients.

To facilitate these goals, the study relied on a sample of 21 participants, 15 of whom were male, that were recruited from two randomised and placebo-controlled trials that were examining the use of analgesic agents to alleviate cancer-related pain. Through an application of grounded theory methodology, the study discovered that participants reported having a positive experience during their participation in the study. However, while the authors concluded by asserting the importance of using symptom control research for this particular population of individuals, their study did not show any improvement in the symptoms that the participants had. In essence, this study managed to realise its objectives in addition to validating its core hypotheses.

Critique

Method

Given this is a traditionally controversial area of research, the researchers understood that many palliative care patients with advanced cancer wanted to participate in symptom control trials. However, given that the data pool from which references could be made is almost non-existent due to the novel nature of the study, the authors settled for a two-centred qualitative study that was based on the application of grounded theory methodology. The methodology used in this study served to perfectly meet the objectives that the authors had identified at the start of their study. For this reason, this methodology suited the study and provided a template upon which future research on the same area can be based. However, there is little evidence of reflexivity in the study in spite of the positive experiences provided by the participants at the end of the study period.

Sample and Setting

In an area of research that is as controversial yet as important as this, the authors failed in their sampling efforts. This is a sample of 21, which is quite small, and the results obtained from this sample limit their generalisation to the larger population. While it is understandable that a majority of the patients contacted to take part in the study declined, this should have served as a pointer for the authors to re-examine their methodology. As a result of maintaining their methodology, the study had a limited number of participants, which compromises the efficacy and applicability of the study's findings.

Nonetheless, the setting in which the sample was recruited, interviewed, and analysed was professional and worked well to eliminate any redundancies among the participants. Notably, this has had a significant impact on the quality of the results obtained from this study. Similarly, it is worth acknowledging that the data obtained from the study is highly reliable since

the authors ensured they achieved data saturation before completing the study. This provided vital insights to the researchers that helped in the analysis of the study.

Data Collection

Data collection was based on interviews conducted by the researchers on the participants during the study period. The study does well in adhering to palliative care principles by ensuring it provided the participants with the opportunity to select their setting of choice for their interviews. Moreover, the study relied only on answers that were provided by the participants, with any comments or answers made by other parties being disregarded. To add richness and depth to this study, the authors ensured they achieved data saturation before completing their study. This served significantly in compensating for their small sample size.

Procedures

The procedures executed by the authors in their study worked well to minimise any bias. First, the interviewers in the study did not have any access to patient information during the sampling process. This eliminated any possibility of the researchers influencing the selection of the study's participants. In addition, the disregard of answers to interviews provided by any other individuals other than the participants also increased the appropriateness of the procedures. The researchers used during the entire study period were also qualified and fully understood the objectives of the study, which helped in increasing the reliability of the study.

Enhancement of Trustworthiness

One of the factors that increase the reliability of this study is the qualifications of the researchers. They are all from accredited and recognised centres of learning and research. The competence and experience of the researchers demonstrate a willingness and commitment to understanding the true impact of symptom control trials among palliative cancer patients. To

increase the trustworthiness of this study, the researchers also screened many of the natal participants to eliminate any possibilities of bias and other factors that stood to dent the credibility and trustworthiness of the study.

Results

Being a qualitative study, the analysis strategy used by the authors was an appropriate fit. However, being a novel study, there was no concrete research upon which references could be drawn. Nonetheless, the data analysis methodology was compatible with the nature and type of data gathered. It should also be noted that the results yield two theories that highlight the positive impacts of subjecting palliative cancer patients to symptom control trials. Furthermore, by analysing the data based on participant experiences before, during, and after the trial, the study eliminates biases that may arise at each stage.

Findings

The findings of this study were adequately summarised to substantiate the core arguments of the authors insofar as the study is concerned. Supporting arguments were also provided to back up the core arguments and augment their applicability and relevance. Of importance is the fact that the findings of the study are consistent with the theme of improving the quality of palliative care and life for advanced cancer patients. From this position, the study puts forward vital insights on the importance of subjecting advanced cancer patients to symptom control trials.

Summary Assessment

While this issue is traditionally controversial, the findings of this study demonstrate the positive effects of having advanced cancer patients participate in symptom control trials. This information proves valuable to nursing practice seeing as the results can be applied to improve the quality of care and life that palliative cancer patients live.

Reference

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