

# Cancer and Empathy

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## Summary

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Quality of relation between patient and physician is important in for diseases such as cancer, which are life-threatening, violate the body's integrity and can sometimes be impossible or very difficult to treat. Empathy is regarded as a key professional skill, necessary for both good medical treatment and patient-physician relationship. In this paper, the importance of empathic approach in the relationship between cancer patient and physician and ethical aspects of this are mentioned.

**Key Words:** Cancer, Empathy, Patient-Physician Relationship, Ethics.

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### *Introduction*

Today, cancer is one of the most important health issues. Importance of cancer is increasing day by day because of various reasons such as diagnostic methods and new treatments, increasing possibilities of benefiting from health services, developments in the treatments of the other diseases and regarding this life survives are getting longer and more people are diagnosed as cancer every day. Cancer is an important public health problem because of high mortality rates. In recent years, developments in cancer treatment increase healing and in some cases get life survives longer. Also, life quality of patients is getting better with supportive treatments. As a result, we can say that cancer is both fatal and a chronicle disease. Because of these characteristics, cancer is a group of diseases that can be frequently seen serious medical and psychosocial problems (1).

Disease is a situation that destroys the biopsychosocial wellness, gives discomfort and distresses. Stress of temporary and non-impressive diseases is also temporary. However, diseases which are life threatening, violate the body's integrity and can sometimes be impossible or very difficult to treat are named as "difficult disease" both in material and moral aspects (2). Cancer is in this group of disease. Because of this, to evaluate cancer patient from the biopsychosocial point of view and to establish qualified relation with patient based on empathy are quite important in adaptation of diagnosis and treatment stages and coping with cancer.

Physicians determine the cancer as a path physiologic event, which is characterized with a proliferation of malign neoplastic cells without control. Nevertheless, many patients' perceptions are consisted of someone's history around them and social cancer culture and limited with samples (3). Man has a lot of reasons to escape from his fears with being aware of protecting ways from cancer, increasing early diagnosis and treatment alternatives. Although, it is possible to cure some cancer types or to live with this disease, lots of people comprehend the word "cancer" similar to "death". Also, cancer causes multiple psychological problems. These multiple problems affect cancer patient, family and medical staff (4). Factors that affect patient from psychological view such as appearance some problems at the time of illness progress or treatment, organ dysfunctions, treatment cost or side effects, fear from operations are sensitive points of patient-physician relationship in cancer cases.

### **Patient-Physician Communication**

Medical practice is also emphasized as a communication art. In this practice, patient expects from his/her physician to establish a meaningful relationship (5). In spite of technology and scientific improvements, communication is the heart of clinical practices. Because,

1. The quality of relationship between patient and physician affects the patient's satisfaction (6).
2. It is accepted that 70% of diagnosis is done after a good patient-physician communication (7).

3. It increases the possibility of obtaining positive results from medical practice.

Communication skill takes its place in the professional attitude. Following expressions are possible with this attitude:

1. To establish a relationship between patient and physician that based on trust (9)
2. To understand the patient's situation (10)
3. To evaluate patient from bio-psychosocial approach
4. To obtain sufficient and proper information about patient and disease (11)
5. To give sufficient and proper information to the patient about his/her situation, treatment alternatives, risks and benefits (11)
6. To increase the effect of physician in patient care (10)
7. To increase patient satisfaction (12)
8. To improve patient's quality of life (13)
9. To give bad news
10. To cope with the reluctance to the treatment
11. To share ethical issues with patient and families
12. To support the harmony between patient and physician with the sense of understanding (10).

"Empathy" is accepted as the most effective and reliable application form of communication (14). It is the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another (15). Empathic communication is very important in diseases, which patient is dependent to the others; especially in cancer that patient has a sense of indefiniteness. So, patient participation in patient-physician relationship is supported by empathic communication.

Empathy is accepted as a key skill for a good treatment and a good patient-physician relationship. Some studies show that patients rarely and spontaneously express their feelings (16, 17). However, most of the cancer patients are in an emotional stress intensively related to the disease and side effects of the cancer treatment (18, 19). We can show three different reasons about this situation:

1. *Reasons originate from the patient:* Age, sex, educational level, socio-cultural characteristics, personality, psychological status of the patient are affected patient's reactions and way of expression of his/her feelings (20, 21).

2. *Reasons originate from the illness:* Addition to the physical difficulties, disease damage person's adaptation to life, cause to appear psychological and socioeconomic problems and these are damaged the balance of life (22). Disease causes a sense of indefiniteness and this can affects patient's feelings (23). It can be hard to adaptation to the new conditions for the patient and appearance of abnormal emotion, thought and behavior can be seen (24). Fear, anxiety and indefiniteness can be diminished individual's skill of controlling and copying with cancer. So, patient expects extraordinary things from his/her physician.
3. *Reasons originate from the physician:* Personality, role, perspective to the patient, professional satisfaction, and burnout level of the physician affect the quality of communication between patient and physician (25-27).

These factors show that interpersonal communication should be based on empathy for the best benefit of the cancer patient.

### **The Importance of Empathic Approach to Cancer Patient**

Indistinctness is the most particularity of cancer. Because of this, the word "cancer" creates image of loneliness, desolation and hopelessness in mind. In the first step, patient does not want to believe the diagnosis and tries to invalid it. Cancer patient lives some emotional stages as hope, denial, anger, enmity, bargain, depression and espousal (2). Contestation ways of this disease are as coercive as itself (28).

To be a physician against of this situation entails an attentive approach to the patient except the treatment. Physician should analyze patient's consciousness and expectation with not to ignore conception differences between patients. To comprehend patient's feelings and fight against cancer with patient are physician's responsibilities. Importance of empathy is getting clearer in this kind of patients whom must to live with an unsuccessful treatment or wait for a death.

Physician should not forget that cancer is mostly synonym to death in community. He/she should ap-

proach to the patient as a human, not only as a cancer patient. Cancer is a kind of disease that requires learning to live together. So, only effort to heal physical situation is insufficient. Primarily adoption of the disease, material and moral difficulties during the treatment, organ missing that causes emotional and physical deficiency, and to be conscious of limited life during terminal phase are the signs that cancer patient intensively needs not only medical but also psychological and social assistance.

Symptomatic problems in cancer are kept in control with surgery, hormone, chemotherapy and radiotherapy. At the time of diagnosis, most of the patients' illnesses get progressively worse and they suffer physically and morally because of the illness. While some physical complaints are evaluated orderly by the physician, psychosocial and economic problems cannot be considered enough. Chemotherapy and radiotherapy have an important role in cancer treatment, but they cause some physical changes as weakness, nausea and balding. Also changes in patient's social life and economical aspect of the disease are the factors that force patient. Medical treatment helps to increase vitality, continue daily life and necessities as dressing, eating, cleaning and the aim is to continue physical functions and increase the quality of life (29).

Lack of empathic communication in the patient-physician relationship can cause some psychosocial problems such as to feel him/herself under threat, to be anxious about the future of his/her family and losing his/her job and to worry regarding to comment events differently because of bad communication (30). Insufficient communication between patient and physician can cause some problems that embarrasses beneficence of patient such as not to get true information from patient or family, and not to get cooperation of patient in treatment. When patients think that their physicians do not understand them, they can be suspicious about their diagnosis and treatment. This situation can cause disappearance of patient accordance, which is important for treatment and also this can cause losing time and money, decreasing life quality (7). In patients whom do not satisfy with communication, we see accordance difficulties in treatment, suspicious about skill and knowledge of physician, mistrust, hopelessness and extending hea-

ling process. Bad communication and misunderstanding can have an important affects on patients' lives especially in special situations like cancer treatment. Also, it is said that results of bad communication between patient and physician should reflect to treatment and quality of life (13).

### **Ethical Dimensions of Empathic Approach**

Efficient relationship between patient and physician supports sharing decision-making and participation of patient for positive behavior and collaboration. Empathy is the key point in diagnosis, investigation, treatment, care, and terminal phase. Using empathic approach in patient-physician communication encourages patient participation. With the participation of patient, diverging from paternalism and applying mutual participation model, in which the physician and patient share responsibility for making decisions and planning the course of treatment practically can be supported. This kind of approach should be helped both physician and patient in such diseases like cancer to respect autonomy, to inform, to take consent and to cope with cancer.

Being hasty and disinterested should cause to increase anxiety of patient. In this kind of statement physician should try to detect patient's main problem. Physician can only remove anxiety with empathic approach in communication. Thus, patient can feel that his/her physician understands him/herself and also realize real reason of his/her problems or medical situation. So, he/she will be in the mood to listen and comprehend.

Patience, tolerance, attention, honesty and knowing that physician understands and will not to leave him/her are the basic requests of patient from his/her physician (1). Physician's aim must be to help patient and solve the problems. To focus on only diagnosis and treatment is a characteristic sample for a mentality that medical profession is not for a patient but for a physician.

We can say that exact communication is a key point in ethical values, patient rights and physician's legal responsibilities. Exact communication provides applicability of medical ethics principles such as beneficence, autonomy and informed consent (31).

Modern medicine gradually begins to intensify on small parts of the body. Ethical applications are face to face dropping behind the technological advances. The risks will be not to see the patient as a human and to leave humanism against the intensive knowledge load. If there is no time for the communication in the patient-physician relationship then physician will become a technician and patient will be a customer. To avoid from this dilemma, to care about patient-physician relationship and empathic approach in this communication should be taken into account.

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