

Palliative medicine - is that a right career path?

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Abstract

Palliative Medicine is a medical specialty that involves providing holistic care to people with life limiting illnesses. It is an emerging specialty with wide range of opportunities for young medical professionals. People are often not willing to specialize in a field that would not cure patients as they believe that job satisfaction is poor in those areas. Through this short communication letter, I have given my personal experience in palliative medicine to young doctors and medical students.

Keywords: Palliative Medicine; Holistic Care; Multidisciplinary Team; Satisfaction.

Introduction

Palliative care utilities integrated approach to patient care meaning seeing and treating the person as a whole individual. The four components of palliative care include physical (pain and other symptoms), psychological (anxiety, fear or depression due to the illness), social (impact of the illness on the social well being like isolation from family or friends, financial burden due to inability to work) and spiritual (guilt, fear of death). It often involves multi disciplinary team members including doctors, nurses, allied health professionals like physiotherapists, dieticians, social workers, and volunteers to address all aspects of care.

Palliative Medicine is something which one can never learn, unless experienced.

I would admit, it is often easy to learn to treat patients with most medical problems just because whenever and wherever we go, the management of most of the diseases will be the same, the protocols might differ according to hospitals or countries though. While being easy to learn how to treat a disease, it becomes most difficult to understand how to treat the person, that is to deal with other aspects of illness apart from physical symptoms like the psychological or social impact the disease has brought about. I am sure, it does demand a lot of mental strength and skills to handle them sensitively which the palliative care professionals exceptionally do.

Is it that challenging mentally???

Imagine, you have been seeing few patients in the ward admitted for a week and at the end of the week some of them die, some go home wishing to die at home and some stay in the ward hoping we would help them to die peacefully. This is how it goes and no doubt this would let anyone down.

However, it depends on how one takes it and their contribution to every demanding situation they come across. Palliative care does give sense of satisfaction, happiness and fulfilment which is unrealised unless experienced. One of my experiences during my palliative care training in India made me realise that deeply when a middle-aged patient in terminal phase was visited by her elderly mother who never imagined she would see her daughter in such situation.

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The elderly mama who has not seen her daughter for quite a while held my hands crying for nothing except for her daughter to look at her face and speak a word, and I, who just stepped into the field of palliative care not that comfortable handling such situations but couldn't escape without telling or doing something just politely told that mama, "Instead of holding my hands and crying, you can go and hold your daughter's hand and talk something to her. Your daughter might hear you though she might not be able to reply and she might be able to sense your presence around her in this most tough time which would really comfort her". The poor mama did exactly what I said. And unbelievably, the patient who was barely rousable until that point opened her eyes and replied to her mom. The sense of relief and happiness on the mama's face is not describable with words.

In an hour, the patient took her final breath. I felt so sorry for the mama who lost her daughter, also happy and satisfied that I was able to give the mama, the one last thing she wished from her dying daughter in the toughest time of her life.

Yes, this is how it really works. All that one need is empathy and compassion to make a difference.

Conclusion

Given the increasing number of people with chronic and life limiting illnesses palliative care is a highly demanding specialty and, young professionals need encouragement to consider it as career choice.