GENERAL

Palliative Care: A Vital Need in Today’s Healthcare Systems

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Palliative care is a special kind of medical care that focuses on improving the quality of life for people who have serious and long-term illnesses. It works by managing not just physical symptoms but also emotional, social, and spiritual distress (World Health Organisation, 2020). This type of care helps reduce pain and discomfort, supports families, and can be given along with treatments that aim to cure the illness. Importantly, palliative care is now often started earlier in the illness and not just at the final stages. With more people living longer and facing chronic diseases, the need for palliative care is growing. However, many people around the world still cannot access it easily.

Why the World Needs More Palliative Care

Every year, about 56.8 million people need palliative care. More than 80% of them live in low- and middle-income countries where healthcare systems often lack resources (World Health Organisation, 2020). This rising demand is mainly because more people are suffering from long-term noncommunicable diseases like cancer, heart failure, and brain disorders, which cause a lot of pain and suffering, often without cures (Connor & Sepulveda Bermedo, 2014). For example, people with diseases like amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) often do not get the care they need, such as clear diagnoses, symptom relief, and support after death for their families (Oliver et al., 2016). Children with life-threatening conditions also face many unmet needs because there is a serious lack of child-focused palliative care (World Health Organisation, 2020).

In hospital intensive care units, about one in seven patients should receive palliative care, especially those with serious problems like multiple organ failure or advanced cancers (Aslakson et al., 2014). Elderly people, who are often frail, suffer from reduced independence and more symptoms as their illnesses progress (Kelley & Bollens-Lund, 2018). Still, worldwide, only about 14% of people who need palliative care actually receive it (World Health Organisation, 2020). This leads to unnecessary pain and mental suffering. The situation is worse in areas where people face difficulties due to location, income, or low awareness about health and healthcare.

Why Palliative Care Matters Today

Today?s healthcare systems, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, have shown how important palliative care is as part of a complete healthcare plan (Rosa et al., 2020). During the pandemic, many people needed end-of-life care at home or in community settings, which made it clear that palliative services are essential (Etkind et al., 2020). Treating palliative care as part of basic health services not only helps reduce pain but also supports mental and social well-being, making the overall care more focused on the patient (Knaul et al., 2018).

Research shows that palliative care can ease pain, anxiety, and other symptoms, and it also increases satisfaction for both patients and their families (Kavalieratos et al., 2016). Home-based care models have been found to reduce hospital visits and emergency care needs, saving money and improving care (Gomes et al., 2013). For people with conditions like advanced Parkinson?s disease, palliative care can help manage symptoms like movement problems, memory loss, and depression, improving their quality of life even in difficult conditions (Miyasaki & Kluger, 2015). In some cases, starting palliative care early can even help people live longer, and shifting care to home settings can reduce unnecessary hospital stays (Temel et al., 2010).

As more people suffer from chronic illnesses, palliative care also plays a role in promoting fairness in healthcare by helping poor and marginalized groups in areas with limited resources (Knaul et al., 2018). Providing relief from suffering should be a key responsibility of all healthcare systems, especially now that more people are affected by noncommunicable diseases.

Challenges and the Way Forward

Despite its proven benefits, palliative care is still not used as much as it should be. Many people mistakenly think it is only for the dying, instead of seeing it as part of a broader approach to managing serious illnesses (Dalal & Bruera, 2017). Key barriers include a shortage of trained professionals, limited teaching about palliative care in medical education (especially in areas like medication), and poor integration with general healthcare systems (Aldridge et al., 2016).

To move forward, policies must focus on using telehealth (online healthcare), respecting cultural differences, and adding more palliative care education to medical training. New approaches, like ?compassionate communities,? show how care can be designed to fit local cultures and needs (Abel et al., 2018). Healthcare systems must raise the status of palliative care to reduce suffering and improve the overall quality of care, especially for the world?s most vulnerable people. By spreading this care more widely, we can better manage serious diseases and ensure dignity and peace for everyone.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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