

Doctors' emotional reactions to recent death of a patient: cross sectional study of hospital doctors

Ellen M Redinbaugh, Amy M Sullivan, Susan D Block, Nina M Gadmer, Matthew Lakoma, Ann M Mitchell, Deborah Seltzer, Jennifer Wolford, Robert M Arnold



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Abstract

Objectives To describe doctors' emotional reactions to the recent death of an "average" patient and to explore the effects of level of training on doctors' reactions.

Design Cross sectional study using quantitative data.
Setting Two academic teaching hospitals in the United States.

Participants 188 doctors (attending physicians (equivalent to UK consultants), residents (equivalent to UK senior house officers), and interns (equivalent to UK junior house officers)) who cared for 68 patients who died in the hospital.

Main outcome measures Doctors' experiences in providing care, their emotional reactions to the patient's death, and their use of coping and social resources to manage their emotions.

Results Most doctors (139/188, 74%) reported satisfying experiences in caring for a dying patient. Doctors reported moderate levels of emotional impact (mean 4.7 (SD 2.4) on a 0-10 scale) from the death. Women and those doctors who had cared for the patient for a longer time experienced stronger emotional reactions. Level of training was not related to emotional reactions, but interns reported needing significantly more emotional support than attending physicians. Although most junior doctors discussed the patient's death with an attending physician, less than a quarter of interns and residents found senior teaching staff (attending physicians) to be the most helpful source of support.

Conclusions Doctors who spend a longer time caring for their patients get to know them better but this also makes them more vulnerable to feelings of loss when these patients die. Medical teams may benefit from debriefing within the department to give junior doctors an opportunity to share emotional responses and reflect on the patient's death.

Introduction

Caring for dying patients is part of every doctor's clinical experience both during training and in subsequent practice. However, the literature on doctors' experiences in caring for the dying is sparse and mostly anecdotal. We sought to extend previous research by investigating doctors' reactions to patients' deaths in two large US

teaching hospitals. We explored the role of training level and other variables related to doctors and patients on doctors' experiences in caring for the dying. Finally, we examined how doctors coped with their emotions, and the role of senior doctors in helping house officers cope with their emotional reactions to patients' deaths.

Methods

Participants

Patient index cases—We obtained index cases by randomly reviewing charts of inpatients who died over the previous week and selecting one to two cases a week for inclusion in the study. Eligibility criteria for index patient cases included: a minimum hospital stay of 24 hours, death occurring on a general medicine unit or intensive care unit, and involvement of hospital doctors in the patient's care. Information abstracted from the charts of the 81 eligible cases included diagnosis, demographics, length of stay, whether or not the patient died in intensive care, and whether resuscitation was attempted.

Doctors—We reviewed charts to identify the medical student, intern (junior house officer), resident (senior house officer), and primary attending physician (consultant) who were caring for the patient at the time of death. In the 81 index cases, only two medical students participated in an index patient's care and as they were both acting interns they were combined with the interns. We included primary care physicians in our group of attending physicians. Of the 251 doctors who had cared for the 81 patients in the index cases, 246 remembered working with the patient and were therefore eligible for the study. Of the eligible doctors, 196 agreed to participate in the study (80% response rate). Eight were excluded because of insufficient data, resulting in a final sample of 188 doctors. For a case to be included in data analyses we required a minimum of two interviewees. From the original 81 cases we excluded 13 because there was only one interviewee.

Procedures

Qualitative data were gathered with a semistructured interview that allowed doctors to tell their individual stories about caring for a patient who died. At the end of the interview doctors were asked six questions that summarised the interview material (see table 1). Doctors then completed self administered question-

Department of Behavioural Medicine and Oncology, University of Pittsburgh Cancer Institute, 5150 Centre Ave #445, Pittsburgh, PA 15232, USA
Ellen M Redinbaugh
research instructor

Division of Psychosocial Oncology and Palliative Care, Dana-Farber Cancer Institute and Brigham and Women's Hospital, Department of Psychiatry, Harvard Medical School, 44 Binney St, Boston, MA 02115, USA

Amy M Sullivan
assistant professor
Susan D Block
associate professor

Nina M Gadmer
project manager
Matthew Lakoma
research assistant

University of Pittsburgh School of Nursing, 415 Victoria Building, 200 Lothrop St, Pittsburgh, PA 15213, USA
Ann M Mitchell
assistant professor

Department of Internal Medicine, University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, 200 Lothrop St, Pittsburgh

Deborah Seltzer
research associate
Jennifer Wolford
research assistant

Robert M Arnold
professor

Correspondence to: E M Redinbaugh ellenr@pitt.edu

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Table 1 Summary of quantitative measures used to assess impact on doctor of death of patient

Measurement domain and description of scale	What scale measures	Variable name
Doctors' experience in providing patient care		
Seven items assessed doctors' satisfaction with index patient's symptom management. Items scored on 0 (least satisfied) to 10 (most satisfied) scale. Not all questions applicable (for example, management of conflict item not applicable if there was no conflict about patient care) to each patient so mean satisfaction score for each doctor was used in analyses	Doctor satisfaction with: patient's pain control; patient's other physical symptom control; management of patient's emotional symptoms; management of patient's family distress; decisions regarding life prolonging care; management of conflict about patient's care; overall care provided to patient	Satisfaction
Four questions administered during interview. Each question scored on 0 (not at all) to 10 (extremely) scale. No cumulative scores	How satisfying to participate in care of this patient How close was your relationship with this patient How much conflict regarding patient care How much did this patient suffer	Satisfying Close Conflict Suffer
Doctors' emotional reactions to patient's death		
Two questions administered during interview. Each question scored on a 0 (not at all) to 10 (extremely) scale.	How disturbing was this death How emotionally powerful was this death	Disturb Powerful
Fourteen items from relative grief measurement scale ⁹ that assessed doctors' grief response to index patient's death in week after death. Items scored 0 (rarely or never experienced) or 1 (occasionally, moderately often, or very often). Summed scores used range 0-14 (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.81$)	Grief symptoms	Grief
Six items from impact of event scale ¹⁰ that assessed doctors' intrusive thoughts and avoidant behaviour during week after patient's death. Items scored either 0 (rarely or never experienced) or 1 (occasionally, moderately often, or very often). Score range 0-6 (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.73$)	Intrusive thoughts: pictures of patient pop into my mind; dreams about patient; avoidant behaviour: avoid getting upset when thinking about patient; avoid dealing with feelings about patient's death; try not to think about patient's death; try not to talk about patient's death	IES (impact of event scale)
Doctors' use of coping resources after the patient's death		
Brief situational COPE scale. ¹¹ Five coping items assessing how doctors coped with index patient's death during week after patient's death. Items scored 0 (rarely or never experienced) or 1 (occasionally, moderately often, or very often). Score range 0-5 (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.64$)	Doctors' use of different coping strategies: try to see it in different, more positive light; find comfort in my spiritual or religious beliefs; get emotional support from others; turn to work/other activities to take my mind off it; express my negative feelings	Coping
Two questions administered during interview. Each question scored on 0 (not at all) to 10 (extremely) scale	How much support from colleagues to cope with patient death How much support received from colleagues regarding patient death	Support needed Support received
Fifteen yes/no questions that assessed people, other doctors, healthcare professionals, and significant others that doctor talked to about patient death and content of conversation (medical details and personal feelings)	Social resources doctors accessed to discuss index patient death	Who did you talk to?
One item where doctors identified person who was most helpful in providing doctor with social support	Doctors' identification of social resource that was most helpful in coping with index patient's death	Who was most helpful?

naires. Here, we have focused on the quantitative data, including the six questions administered at the end of the interview and self administered questionnaires.

Measures

We grouped the measures under one of three headings: doctors' experiences in providing patient care, doctors' emotional reactions to the death of the patient, and doctors' use of coping resources after the patient's death (see table 1). We used three measures that show good reliability and validity in general populations: the grief reaction scale,¹ a short version of the impact of events scale,² and the brief COPE.³

Data analyses

Table 1 shows the outcome variables, including doctors' experiences, emotional reactions, and use of coping resources. The key predictor variable of interest was level of training (intern, resident, or attending physician); other predictors were variables related to doctors and patients, such as sex, marital status, and duration of care. See bmj.com for a table of doctors' and patients' demographic characteristics.

We report univariate statistics as means and standard deviations for continuous variables and percentages for categorical variables. We tested bivariate associations using χ^2 tests to compare categorical variables, correlation coefficients to measure linear associations, independent groups *t* tests to compare means, and analysis of variance to compare means of more than two groups.

Results

Doctors' experiences in providing patient care

Most of the doctors (154, 82%) had not cared for the patient before the final admission to hospital. During

that admission, doctors knew the patient for only a short period of time: 68 (36%) knew the patient for three days or less, another 68 (36%) knew the patient for four to seven days, and only 53 (28%) reported caring for the patient longer than a week. In total 117 doctors (62%) classified their relationship to the patient as not close (for example, ≤ 3 on a 0-10 point scale) (table 2). On the other hand, 21 (11%) reported feeling very close to the patient, and this was associated with providing patient care for a longer period of time ($r=0.38$, $P<0.01$).

One hundred and thirty nine (74%) doctors thought that taking care of the patient was a satisfying or very satisfying experience (table 2). Longer durations of providing care were associated with more satisfying experiences ($r=0.20$, $P<0.01$). Few doctors reported conflict among family and members of the healthcare team regarding patient treatment goals (32, 17%), poor symptom management (8, 4%), or patient suffering (24, 13%).

Doctors' emotional reactions to the patient's death

Descriptive analyses indicated that many doctors reported moderate emotional impact from a patient's death, though 58 (31%) doctors rated the death as having strong emotional impact (table 2). Many doctors (103, 55%) reported that the patient's death disturbed them very little, but 43 (23%) reported that the patient's death was very disturbing to them. On average, doctors reported experiencing two (out of a possible 14) symptoms of grief after the death. The most commonly reported symptoms were "feeling upset when thinking about the patient" (88, 47%) and feeling "numb" (45, 24%). Doctors reported around one symptom (out of six) on the impact of events scale, with "Avoid getting upset when thinking about the

Table 2 Responses of 188 doctors to death of patients measured by variables assessing experiences, emotional reactions, and use of coping resources. Figures are mean (SD) scores and numbers (percentage) of low, moderate, and high scorers

	Mean (SD)	Low scorers*	Moderate scorers*	High scorers*
Doctors' experiences in providing patient care (actual range)				
Satisfaction (1-10)†	7.0 (1.7)	7 (4)	70 (38)	107 (58)
Satisfying (0-10)†	5.8 (2.6)	48 (26)	51 (27)	87 (47)
Close (0-9)	3.1 (2.3)	117 (62)	51 (27)	21 (11)
Conflict (0-10)†	2.9 (2.9)	123 (67)	29 (16)	31 (17)
Suffer (0-10)†	3.6 (2.4)	95 (52)	64 (35)	24 (13)
Doctors' emotional reactions to patient's death (actual range)				
Disturb (0-10)†	3.9 (2.6)	102 (55)	41 (22)	43 (23)
Powerful (0-10)†	4.7 (2.4)	67 (36)	62 (33)	58 (31)
Grief (0-11)‡	2.3 (2.7)	135 (75)	34 (19)	11 (6)
Impact of event scale (0-6)§	1.3 (1.6)	115 (64)	54 (30)	11 (6)
Doctors' use of coping resources after patient's death (actual range)				
Coping (0-5)¶	1.6 (1.5)	94 (51)	66 (36)	24 (13)
Support needed (0-9)	1.7 (2.1)	154 (83)	24 (13)	8 (4)
Support received (0-10)†	6.6 (3.4)	27 (24)	12 (11)	73 (65)

*Ranges based on wording used for each measure.

†Low=0-3, moderate=4-6, high=7-10.

‡Low=0-3, moderate=4-7, high=8-11.

§Low=0-1, moderate=2-4, high=5-6.

¶Low=0-1, moderate=2-3, high=4-5.

Table 3 Social resources accessed by doctors and comparisons by level of training. Figures are numbers (percentage) of doctors

	All (n=182)	Attending physician (n=64)	Residents (n=57)	Interns (n=61)	χ^2 , P value
Did you talk to an attending physician?	118 (65)	34 (53)	42 (74)	43 (68)	6.76, P<0.05
Did you talk to a resident?	146 (80)	45 (70)	48 (84)	56 (89)	8.33, P<0.02
Did you talk to a non-doctor HCP?	95 (52)	35 (55)	29 (51)	32 (50)	0.11, P=0.95
Did you talk to your spouse or SO?	76 (42)	21 (33)	25 (44)	30 (48)	4.20, P=0.13
Of the people listed above, who was most helpful?:					
Attending physician	38 (21)	11 (17)	13 (24)	13 (21)	32.0, P<0.01
Resident	44 (24)	6 (9)	15 (27)	22 (36)	
Non-doctor HCP	11 (6)	6 (9)	2 (4)	3 (5)	
Spouse or SO	45 (25)	12 (19)	15 (27)	17 (28)	
No one	44 (24)	29 (46)	10 (18)	6 (10)	

HCP=healthcare professional; SO=significant other.

patient" being the most commonly endorsed item (70, 37%).

Although interns reported more symptoms of grief than attending physicians (mean 2.9 (SD 2.9) *v* 1.7 (2.5), $P < 0.03$), this finding was not significant. Longer durations of providing care were consistently associated with stronger emotional reactions: $r = 0.21$ ($P < 0.01$) for emotional impact, $r = 0.19$ ($P < 0.01$) for disturbing, $r = 0.26$, ($P < 0.01$) for grief, and $r = 0.20$ ($P < 0.01$) for the impact of events scale. Female doctors reported more symptoms of grief than male doctors (3.3 (3.2 *v* 1.8 (2.1), $P < 0.01$).

Doctors' use of coping resources after the patient's death

Doctors reported using an average of two coping strategies (out of five) to manage the emotions associated with an index patient's death. The most commonly endorsed were "getting emotional support from others" (86, 46%), "trying to see the death in a different light to make it seem more positive" (68, 36%), and "turning to work or other activities to take your mind off of it" (68, 36%). Female doctors used more coping behaviours than male doctors (2.2 (1.5) *v* 1.4 (1.4), $P < 0.01$), and residents used more coping behaviours than either interns or attending physicians (2.1 (1.5) *v* 1.6 (1.4) and 1.2 (1.4), $P < 0.01$).

Most doctors (156, 83%) reported needing little emotional support from their colleagues (table 2).

Interns reported needing more emotional support than attending physicians (2.3 (2.2) *v* 1.1 (1.7), $P < 0.01$). Female doctors reported needing more emotional support than male doctors (2.5 (2.4) *v* 1.3 (1.7), $P < 0.01$). Although most doctors in need of support felt they had received it from their colleagues, 66 (35%) felt their needs had gone unmet.

Most residents (42, 74%) and interns (43, 68%) spoke to the attending physicians about the death of the patient (table 3). However, residents (48, 84%) and interns (56, 89%) relied more on talking with each other or another resident about their experiences with the death (table 3). Less than a quarter of residents (14, 24%) and interns (13, 21%) identified an attending physician as the most useful person in helping them cope with the patient's death (table 3).

Discussion

This study describes doctors' reactions to routine deaths of patients on general medicine and medical intensive care units in two teaching hospitals. The patients who died were usually new to the doctors, and most doctors did not feel close to them. Still, doctors reported moderate emotional impact from the patient's death and a substantial minority rated the death as being very disturbing. Contrary to our expectations, junior doctors did not differ from attending

physicians in their emotional reactions to patients' deaths. However, their need for and use of social support differed from that of attending physicians.

Our findings regarding sex differences are consistent with broader psychological findings. Compared with men, women consistently report more psychological symptoms,⁴ greater need for social support, and higher levels of received support.⁵ Female doctors report more psychological distress than male doctors, whether they are interns, residents, or attending physicians.⁶⁻⁹ In our study, female doctors reported more symptoms of grief and used more coping resources than male doctors. In particular, female doctors needed and received more support from their colleagues than male doctors.

The amount of time a doctor spends taking care of a dying patient seems to be both a source of satisfaction and a source of distress. Longer duration of care was associated with a more satisfying experience and greater feelings of closeness to the patient. However, it was also associated with finding the death more disturbing and emotionally powerful as well as more reported symptoms of grief and trauma. Our findings are similar to qualitative research in which doctors describe satisfaction in providing good end of life care while simultaneously expressing a sense of loss after a patient they knew well died.¹⁰

Potential risk factors

Our data show that while most deaths do not elicit a strong emotional response in doctors, we can identify those situations in which greater needs for emotional support may be present. These include the presence of a long doctor-patient relationship or the involvement of a female doctor or an intern. Being able to identify deaths in which the clinicians may be "at risk" of higher levels of emotional distress provides educators with some guidance about situations in which extra attention to these issues is essential. Unfortunately, in our current environment, these needs are likely to be unaddressed. Research has shown that senior physicians in charge of training house officers tend to underestimate emotional distress in junior doctors.¹¹⁻¹² Furthermore, the culture of medicine, through its emphasis on biomedical issues and its lack of emotional support,¹³ may also contribute to trainees' reluctance to report needs for emotional support. Although interns and residents were usually successful in identifying someone among their peers to talk to about the death, 46% (36) of attending physicians found that no one was helpful. What is the cumulative impact of emotionally draining deaths on attending physicians who "do not need" emotional support?

Limitations

Our study had several limitations. While we made every effort to contact respondents within two weeks of the patient's death, interviews were sometimes delayed, leading to potential recall bias. Although we used standardised instruments whenever possible, few standardised measures exist that specifically assess doctors' emotions. The quantitative measures used may have lacked the sensitivity to measure subtle and highly individual reactions to death that may be better elucidated through qualitative methods. We will

What is already known on this topic

The mostly anecdotal evidence on caring for dying patients contains stories of sadness, guilt, and loss

Longitudinal data suggest that junior doctors may be more strongly affected by patients' deaths than senior doctors

Female doctors report more psychological distress than male doctors

What this study adds

Doctors are moved by the deaths of the patients for whom they care

The amount of time a doctor spends taking care of a dying patient can be a source of both satisfaction and distress

Female doctors and interns may require more emotional support after patients' deaths

report on our qualitative findings in subsequent papers.

Conclusions

Our research provides new insights into the effect of patients' deaths on doctors and raises some questions about current medical training in the United States. Doctors are moved by the deaths of the strangers for whom they care, and they are often powerfully affected by the deaths of patients with whom they have forged close relationships. These strong emotional responses are not often discussed by the attending physicians in charge of their interns' and residents' learning. This conveys a message about how death is to be handled and potentially isolates learners who could benefit from having an opportunity to receive a seasoned perspective on what it is like to care for a patient who dies. A conspiracy of silence toward emotions can potentially cause trainees to develop maladaptive coping patterns that lead to burnout and other forms of emotional distress.¹⁴ Further research should investigate both how the attending physicians respond to distress in junior doctors as well as studies of how junior doctors' opinions regarding how attending physicians can be supportive.

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Effects of euthanasia on the bereaved family and friends: a cross sectional study

Nikkie B Swarte, Marije L van der Lee, Johanna G van der Bom, Jan van den Bout, A Peter M Heintz



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Abstract

Objective To assess how euthanasia in terminally ill cancer patients affects the grief response of bereaved family and friends.

Design Cross sectional study.

Setting Tertiary referral centre for oncology patients in Utrecht, the Netherlands.

Participants 189 bereaved family members and close friends of terminally ill cancer patients who died by euthanasia and 316 bereaved family members and close friends of comparable cancer patients who died a natural death between 1992 and 1999.

Main outcome measures Symptoms of traumatic grief assessed by the inventory of traumatic grief, current feelings of grief assessed by the Texas revised inventory of grief, and post-traumatic stress reactions assessed by the impact of event scale.

Results The bereaved family and friends of cancer patients who died by euthanasia had less traumatic grief symptoms (adjusted difference -5.29 (95% confidence interval -8.44 to -2.15)), less current feeling of grief (adjusted difference 2.93 (0.85 to 5.01)); and less post-traumatic stress reactions (adjusted difference -2.79 (-5.33 to -0.25)) than the family and friends of patients who died of natural causes. These differences were independent of other risk factors.

Conclusions The bereaved family and friends of cancer patients who died by euthanasia coped better with respect to grief symptoms and post-traumatic stress reactions than the bereaved of comparable cancer patients who died a natural death. These results should not be interpreted as a plea for euthanasia, but as a plea for the same level of care and openness in all patients who are terminally ill.

Introduction

Grief is a normal reaction to the death of a loved one and normally does not require any professional help. Traumatic grief refers to situations where grief symptoms take too long or too short, are too intense or not intense enough, or come too late.¹ Depending on

the definition, 10-20% of bereaved people will suffer from traumatic grief.

Sudden loss, loss of a child or a partner, low self esteem, low internal control, lack of religion or spiritual belief, lack of social support, low education, and young age have been identified as risk factors for developing traumatic grief.² Unnatural death, such as suicide, can cause severe grief reactions in family members.³ As euthanasia is also considered as an unnatural death, it has been suggested that euthanasia may induce traumatic grief.¹ However, the grief experienced by family members in suicide cases differs from grief after euthanasia, mainly because the relatives of the latter have had the opportunity to "say goodbye," which is seldom the case in suicides.⁴

In the Netherlands euthanasia is carried out on about 3200 people a year, of whom 80% have cancer.⁵⁻⁶ The aim of this study was to examine the effects of euthanasia in terminal cancer patients on grief among bereaved family and friends.

Participants and methods

Study population

We conducted a cross sectional study among the bereaved families and friends of cancer patients who had died, either by euthanasia or natural causes, in the University Medical Center Utrecht between 1992 and 1999. Euthanasia was defined as "the intentional termination of the life of a patient at his or her request by a physician."⁶⁻⁷ This definition excludes termination of life without the request of the patient, as well as alleviation of pain and other symptoms with drugs that finally hasten the patient's death. For each patient who died by euthanasia, we selected two control patients from all cancer patients who died from natural causes in our hospital during the same period. We matched control patients by age at death, by year of death, and by sex. During 1992-9, 95 patients died by euthanasia in our hospital, of whom 89 were oncology patients. We were unable to contact the bereaved family and friends of 11 of these 89 patients. We therefore selected 156 control patients from the 1360 oncology patients who died naturally in our hospital during the same period.

Department of Gynaecology, F05.829, University Medical Center Utrecht, PO Box 85500, 3508 GA Utrecht, Netherlands
Nikkie B Swarte
research fellow

A Peter M Heintz
professor of gynaecological oncology

Department of Clinical Psychology, University of Utrecht

Marije L van der Lee
research fellow

Jan van den Bout
professor of clinical psychology

Julius Centre for Health Sciences and Primary Care, University Medical Center Utrecht

Johanna G van der Bom
assistant professor of clinical epidemiology

Correspondence to: N B Swarte
n.swarte@azu.nl

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