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Link to publication record in Ulster University Research Portal

Published in: Palliative Medicine

Publication Status: Published (in print/issue): 21/05/2019

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/0269216319844405

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“Constipation is often seen as a Simple Thing": Exploring Healthcare Professionals’ Perspectives of Managing Constipation within Specialist Palliative Care: A Qualitative Study

McIlpatrick, S. 1, (PI), Muldrew, D.H.L. 1, Carduff, E. 2, Clarke, M. 3, Coast, J. 4, Finucane, A. 2, Graham-Wisener, L. 3, Hasson, F. 1, Larkin, P. 5, MacArtney, J. 5, McCorry, N. 2, Slater, P. 1, Watson, M. 4, & Wright, E. 2
1 Ulster University, UK 2 Marie Curie Hospice, UK 3 Queens University Belfast, UK 4 University of Bristol, UK 5 University of Lausanne, Switzerland 6 Hospice UK, London, UK 7 R&D PPI representative, Belfast, UK

This work was supported by Marie Curie [grant number ref. MCCC-RP-16-20993]

Introduction

Constipation is a major problem, and significant concern, for many patients who are receiving specialist palliative care (SPC). Whilst clinical guidelines have been developed, there is a dearth of evidence regarding healthcare professionals (HCPs) experiences of constipation management within such settings.

Aim: To explore healthcare professionals (HCPs) perspectives of managing constipation within SPC settings

Methods

Focus groups

Sample: 27 HCPs
- Doctors n=7
- Nurses n=14
- Pharmacists n=1
- Other n=5

Setting: 3 specialist palliative care units

Topics: Knowledge clinical practices and barriers/ facilitators surrounding constipation assessment/ management in SPC units.

Results

Physical symptom

Constipation was seen as simple to manage, with a focus on the symptom’s physical manifestation. Assessment and management were approached from an objective stance. Few HCPs identified the psycho-social implications for the patient.

"Constipation is often seen as a simple thing… It’s pretty straight forward" Nurse

Pharmacologically driven management

Strength in pharmacological management was evident, with discussions of drug choices dominating the conversation.

“We probably all have [laxatives] we turn to on a regular basis...” Doctor

“We are very good at the pharmacological interventions” Nurse

Barriers

Embarrassment, confusion, secondary symptom status, poor documentation, physical limitations

"When families are there…they are very embarrassed and want you to walk out of the room” Nurse

Facilitators

Professional status/approach of the HCP, team communication, the environment, the patient and relatives, adequate resources

"The fact you’re a doctor or a nurse, people will then open up about all sorts of things very easily” Nurse

Discussion

- By focusing on the physical symptom, HCPs overlooked the psychological and social implications of constipation throughout the assessment and management of the patient
- Clinical guidelines on constipation management in palliative care call HCPs to incorporate non-pharmacological strategies alongside pharmacological intervention, including optimising toileting, privacy, diet and fluids, and mobility.