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Examining the Efficacy of Psychosocial Support in Cancer Management: A Systematic Review of Interventions in Nigeria

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Cancer is a deadly illness and pervasive health challenge, that not only affects the physical well-being of individuals but also significantly impacts their psychosocial health. In Nigeria, where the burden of cancer is steadily rising with an estimated mortality of 71,000 annually, there is a growing recognition of the need for comprehensive care that extends beyond medical treatments. This systematic review aims to evaluate the efficacy of psychosocial support interventions in the management of cancer in Nigeria. The review encompasses a comprehensive analysis of existing literature, focusing on studies conducted and diagnosis in Nigeria over the past decade. Various psychosocial support interventions, ranging from counselling and support groups to educational programs, will be examined for their impact on the psychological, emotional, and social well-being of cancer patients. The review also considers the influence of these interventions on treatment adherence, quality of life, and overall clinical outcomes. Preliminary findings indicate a diverse landscape of psychosocial support initiatives in Nigeria, including community-based efforts, healthcare provider interventions, and collaborative programs involving governmental and non-governmental organizations. The review assesses the methodologies employed in these studies, emphasizing the need for rigorous research designs to establish causal relationships between psychosocial support and improved cancer outcomes. This will inform healthcare professionals, policymakers, and researchers about the status of psychosocial support in cancer management in Nigeria. By identifying gaps in the existing literature and highlighting successful interventions, this study contributes to the development of evidence-based guidelines for integrating psychosocial support into cancer care protocols in Nigeria and potentially other resource-limited settings. Ultimately, the findings from this review have the potential to enhance the holistic approach to cancer management, improving the overall well-being and resilience of individuals facing this challenging disease in Nigeria.

Keywords: Psychosocial support, Cancer management, Cancer care, Healthcare in Nigeria.

Positive Effect of Psychosocial Support in Cancer Management

The diagnosis of cancer is unexpected hence the patient and their significant others are not prepared for the long-term impact the diagnosis will have on their spiritual,

physical, financial, social and emotional wellbeing (i). In many low to middle economic countries, Nigeria the major source of psychological stress faced by a patient diagnosed with cancer is fear of getting advanced treatment that will improve their prognosis (ii).

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Therefore, having structured psychosocial services to support patients and their families will go a long way to help with coping mechanisms ⁽ⁱⁱⁱ⁾. In recent years, some oncology centre in Nigeria have incorporated psychosocial support in the management of patients diagnosed with cancer and this has been found effective in some establishments ^(iv). As per (iii) cancer diagnosis comes to some patient as a death sentence, given that the annual mortality rate is estimated at 72,000 and 102,000 newly diagnosed cases by the World Health Organization ^(v), hence the importance of psychosocial support is essential, this will bring a ray of hope and improves their resilience to comply with the treatment regime. In Nigeria where the average minimum wage of an individual is not sufficient to meet their daily basic needs, paying for medical treatment especially the advanced cost of cancer treatment can be devastating ^(vi). It is therefore imperative for healthcare settings to find alternative means of supporting patients and their families in these circumstances. The psychosocial factor is the interrelation between social factors and individual mind and behaviour, thus psychosocial support is most of the time less costly in situations where there are volunteers and appropriate use of technology ^(xiv). Patients diagnosed with cancer benefit from support that ranges from but is not limited to counselling, education, support groups, mindful exercises, job coaching, housing etc. ^(vii).

Despite increasing the level of research in oncology and improving treatment modalities through an evidence-based approach globally, understanding the efficacy of psychosocial care and in-cooperating with it as part of the multidisciplinary approach to cancer management in Nigeria, there is still a need to explore more psychosocial services, increase accessibility to patients and families. This study therefore aims to evaluate the efficacy of psychosocial support available to cancer patients.

Method

This overview of systematic reviews was consistent to the PRISMA guidelines ^(viii) Primary research papers were sources from PubMed and Google Scholar. Five published research articles between 2013 to 2023 met the inclusion criteria of qualitative studies, psychosocial support, and improving the quality of life of people living with cancer in Nigeria.

Results

According to existing literature, patient and their caregivers are not prepared for the numerous burden that comes with cancer diagnosis, hence they struggle with denial, and many are not motivated to seek medical help ^(ix). Because Nigeria is a highly religious community; some patients would rather address medical diagnosis from a spiritual perspective by going to different prayer mountains for support and healing prayers, however the need for spiritual support cannot be overridden when considering the overall wellbeing of a patient diagnosed with a terminal illness.

Findings from the five included qualitative studies which involve 210 participants (people diagnosed of cancer) show that most patients lack adequate knowledge of the diagnosis and disease process, and many are distressed with the financial burden of paying for their treatment ⁽ⁱⁱ⁾. Similarly, relatives and families who serve as caregivers are faced with the trauma of life after cancer treatment; the possible complications of infertility, dietary modification and lifestyle change are a few of the concerns raised by patients and their significant others ^(x). This is consistent with similar studies conducted in developed countries where cancer patients including cancer survivors are no longer excited about participating in activities of daily living, patients are overwhelmed with depression that is a result of anger from dealing with the diagnosis of cancer and treatment modalities ^(xi).

The consistent findings in all the literature highlight a lack of proper information which includes information on how to deal with the fear of chemotherapy, locally available nutritious diet and exercises ^(xii, iv, vii). However, psychosocial services are intended to help patients and their caregivers cope with the disease, and this involves organizing group counselling sessions which may involve cancer survivors sharing related stories of their journey. Nevertheless, it has been reported that the efficiency of psychosocial services is limited due to lack of accessibility, and lack of trained professionals such as physiotherapists and dieticians ^(xiii, vii).

Discussion

The diagnosis of cancer scared patients and families away from seeking appropriate help early, this is due to financial constraints, especially in low-medium income countries like Nigeria where medical treatment is essentially out of pocket payments. Many people go from being rich to the poverty level mainly by paying for the expensive cost of treatment. This devastating situation is part of the reasons why psychosocial support should be incorporated as part of the multidisciplinary approach to cancer care. Consistent studies generally show that patients receive most financial, emotional and psychological support from relatives; friends and families ^(xiii). Additionally, some are supported by spiritual leaders who continually encourage them to have faith in their treatment journey, other support patients benefit from is assistance with completing tasks ^(xiv, xv).

The major reason why some patients may not fully benefit from psychosocial support is due to denial of accepting diagnosis thus many are presented late to oncology units where psychosocial supports are been carried out ^(xvi, xvii). Therefore, psychosocial support needs to be a part of the diagnosis process from the time of carrying out laboratory investigations, patients and their families should be signposted to available psychosocial resources that will prepare them ahead of the diagnosis confirmation.

Group support and counselling are the most common support available in various oncology departments within healthcare settings in Nigeria. A major activity carried out at the various sessions includes psychoeducation on how to deal with different complications that come with chemotherapy, and deep breathing exercises which are usually in the form of engaging the mind; patients carried out the exercise with the thoughts of breathing in life, peace and breathing out fears, anxiety, pain ^(iv)

Health information literacy and awareness is another support that should be made available to patients and their families, this will reduce the anxiety and distress experienced from cancer. It further helps coping strategies as patient copes better when they are knowledgeable about the disease process and expected prognosis ^(xiii). Although, many of the patients preferred a one-to-one counselling and education session before the commencement of treatments and post treatment ^(xiv).

Conclusion

This study has examined the efficacy of psychosocial support in cancer management in Nigeria. The suggested features including in cooperating psychosocial support in cancer management from the point of diagnosis, to be a part of the multidisciplinary care package. Similarly, continuous support post treatment and follow-up for patients and caregivers including families should be considered. Oncology centres should engage in the training of medical staff and other allied professionals to provide psychosocial services. By identifying gaps in the existing literature and highlighting successful interventions, this study contributes to the development of evidence-based guidelines for integrating psychosocial support into cancer care protocols in Nigeria and potentially other resource-limited settings. Ultimately, the findings from this review have the potential to enhance the holistic approach to cancer management, improving the overall well-being and resilience of individuals facing this challenging disease in Nigeria.

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