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An exploration through interview & drawings of the experiences of patients diagnosed with oral cancer across their cancer trajectory

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Background: The treatment of oral cancer is complex and lengthy. Curative treatment implies a combination of surgery, radiotherapy and chemotherapy. The main goal of treatment is to guarantee long-term tumour free survival with as little functional and cosmetic damage. Despite progress in developing these strategies, cancers of the oral cavity continue to have high mortality rates that have not improved dramatically over the past ten years.

Aim: The aim of this study was to uniquely explore the dynamic changes in the physical, psychological, social and existential experiences of newly diagnosed patients with oral cancer at two points across their cancer illness trajectory i.e., at the time of diagnosis and at the end of treatment.

Methodology: A qualitative prospective longitudinal design was employed. Non-probability purposive sampling allowed the recruitment of 15 participants. The principal data collection method used was a digital audio taped semi-structured interview along with drawings produced by the participants.

Analysis: Data was analysed using latent content analysis.

Summary: Three 'dynamic' themes, physical, psychosocial and existential experiences were revealed which interact and influence each other in a complex and compound whole. These experiences are present at different degrees and throughout the entire trajectory of care. Patients have a number of specific concerns and challenges that cannot be compartmentalised into unitary or discrete aspects of their daily lives.

Conclusion & Implications: An understanding of the patient's experience of their illness at all stages of the disease trajectory, is essential to service providers' decision making if the delivery of care is to be client centred. Dynamic and fluctuating changes in the patient's personal experience of the cancer journey require dynamic, energetic and timely input from health care professionals.

Biography

Dr. Brendan Noonan trained as a General Nurse in Limerick University Hospital and attained his MSc in Clinical Nursing and Doctorate in Nursing (DN) in University College Cork. Since 2005, he has worked as a lecturer, researcher and practitioner in the Catherine McAuley School of Nursing and Midwifery University College Cork and the South Infirmary-Victoria University Hospital Cork. Brendan is an active member of the cancer research strand within the school. His research interests pertain to the experience of cancer, with a specific focus on the entire cancer trajectory and the supports required throughout. Brendan supervises MSc students for their research dissertation and has published widely in the international literature.

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