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Qualitative study on physiotherapy in advanced cancer care: barriers, facilitators, and pathways to excellence

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Background

With advances in cancer treatments, more patients live longer with advanced stages of the disease, often facing complex symptom burdens and functional decline. Physiotherapy has emerged as a critical component of oncology care, supporting symptom relief, autonomy, and quality of life. Yet, its role in advanced cancer care remains under-recognised and inconsistently integrated.

Objective

PHYSPECTIVE is a multiperspective qualitative study aiming to explore the barriers and facilitators for embedding physiotherapy into advanced oncology pathways, viewed through the experiences of physiotherapists, physicians, and patients. By doing so, it seeks to identify strategies that can help promote excellence and inclusivity in oncology physiotherapy in the modern era.

Methods

Thirty individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with physiotherapists (n=10), physicians (n=10), and patients with advanced cancer (n=10). Interview guides were co-developed with experts in oncology, physiotherapy, and palliative/supportive care. Data were analyzed thematically, using iterative coding and constant comparison to identify cross-cutting themes.

Results

Key behavioural determinants influenced physiotherapy integration: limited awareness and knowledge led to late referrals; attitudes and beliefs shaped perceived relevance; while professional identity, confidence, and team dynamics shaped actual uptake. Facilitators included patient trust, adaptive person-centred care, and positive teamwork, whereas fragmented pathways, inadequate training, and lack of systemic recognition remained substantial barriers.

Conclusions

PHYSPECTIVE shows that physiotherapy is pivotal in advanced oncology care, where function and dignity are at stake. Earlier referral, stronger collaboration, policy support, and tailored training are key to implementation.

Clinical impact

In advanced cancer, physiotherapy can directly improve day-to-day clinical outcomes by sustaining mobility, preventing deconditioning, and relieving pain, dyspnoea, and fatigue. Yet many patients miss this support due to misconceptions and late or absent referrals. Embedding physiotherapy earlier and more systematically is essential to preserve independence, participation, and dignity in progressive disease.

Keywords

Advanced Cancer

Physiotherapy

Qualitative Research

Barriers of Integration

Conflict of Interest & Ethical Approval

yes

Abstract submitters declaration

yes

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