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Prevalence of Patients with Palliative Needs in the Wards of Portuguese Public Hospitals

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Introduction: The early referral to palliative care is one of the keys to the success of this care, to promote the best quality of life possible of patient and his family and to achieve the most important outcomes.

Aim: To determine the prevalence of patients with palliative need in the Portuguese public hospitals, from which how many are referenced to palliative care and if not what are the main reasons.

Methods: 32 physicians from 11 hospitals were asked about 1273 patients (≥18 years old) using the surprised question (Would you be surprised if your patient died within the next year, 6 months, 30 and 15 days?); when the answer in at least one period was no, they were asked if the patient was referenced to palliative care and if not, they were invited to indicate 5 main reasons from a list of 19. Exclusion criteria: patients in wards of pediatric, obstetrics, psychiatry, palliative care units and ER.

Results: The death was expected within 1 year for 51.4% (prevalence of patients with palliative care needs), within 6 months for 38.3%, within 30 days for 22.3% and within 15 days for 16.1%. 67.2% of cancer patients, 48.7% of non-cancer patients and 45.5% of mixed disease have palliative care needs. Only 6.8% of the patients whose death was expected within 1 year, 7.5%, 9.9% and 9.8% of those whose death was expected within 6 months, 30 days and 15 days, were referred to palliative care. The 5 main reasons for not referral were: the patient is still actively treated to the disease, we still can treat (cure) the patient, the symptom control was achieved, the patient is not dying and the palliative care was not the best for the patient.

Conclusions: The general hospital wards have a high prevalence of patients with palliative care needs but only a very few of them are referred to palliative care. More education of the physician in palliative care is needed to increase the proportion of patients referred and to increase the early referral as one of the keys to success of health care.