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CMAJ Open. 2023 Aug 22;11(4):E745-E753. doi: 10.9778/cmajo.20220238. Print 2023 Jul-Aug.

Providing palliative and end-of-life care in long-term care during the COVID-19 pandemic: a qualitative study of clinicians' lived experiences

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PMID: 37607749 PMCID: PMC10449019 DOI: 10.9778/cmajo.20220238

Abstract

Background: A disproportionate number of COVID-19-related deaths in Canada occurred in long-term care homes, affecting residents, families and staff alike. This study explored the experiences of long-term care clinicians with respect to providing palliative and end-of-life care during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methods: We used a qualitative research approach. Long-term care physicians and nurse practitioners (NPs) in Ontario, Canada, participated in semistructured interviews between August and September of 2021. Interviews were undertaken virtually, and results were analyzed using thematic analysis.

Results: Twelve clinicians (7 physicians and 5 NPs) were interviewed. We identified 5 themes, each with several subthemes: providing a palliative approach to care, increased work demands and changing roles, communication and collaboration, impact of isolation and visitation restrictions, and impact on the providers' personal lives. Clinicians described facing several concurrent challenges, including the uncertainty of COVID-19 illness, staffing and supply shortages, witnessing many deaths, and distress caused by isolation. These resulted in burnout and feelings of moral distress. Previous training and integration of the palliative care approach in the long-term care home, access to resources, increased communication and interprofessional collaboration, and strong leadership mitigated the impact and led to improved palliative care and a sense of pride while facing these challenges.

Interpretation: The pandemic had a considerable impact on clinicians caring for residents in long-term care homes at the end of life. It is important to address these lived experiences and use the lessons learned to identify strategies to improve palliative care in long-term care homes and reduce the impact of future pandemics with respect to palliative care.

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