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Qualitative Outcome Research of Palliative Care Music Therapy

Background

Existing outcome studies about palliative music therapy are promising but inconclusive. Outcome measures primarily rely on patient self-report and little is known about music therapy when self-report is no longer possible due to deteriorating function close to death. Less is known about the music therapy experience for family members and friends; this is important in light of findings regarding detrimental health effects for spouses/partners of cancer survivors.

Objectives

A qualitative inquiry was designed to gain understanding about the experience of palliative care music therapy for in-patients and their family members and friends *from their perspectives*.

Methods

The study is being conducted in four in-patient palliative care units in four Canadian cities. Data collection methods include semi-structured interview, chart review, participant observation and field notes. Contextual interviews are conducted with program directors, medical staff, and the music therapists. Follow-up interviews are planned for family members and friends. Data analysis will be steered by a set of preliminary questions and further guided by Max van Manen's theory of lifeworld existentials.

Results

Preliminary findings indicate that music therapy provides valued opportunities for transcendence of the emotional and physical hardship of terminal illness. Such a perspective has not been found by means of conventional outcome measures.

Conclusions

It is too early to draw specific conclusions from this study currently in progress. It can, however, be concluded that qualitative inquiry provides unique standpoints, methods and insights about experience. Qualitative outcome research is a methodology that might be viable for other CAM modalities.