

A Sociological Analysis on the Suffering of Elderly Cancer Patients

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Cancer and aging populations are both globalized realities. Age-induced biological changes make people more vulnerable to cancer. Cancer is prevalent regardless of economic development levels. The elderly population in Sri Lanka has doubled between the census years of 1981 and 2011. According to the 2012 Census, 12.4% of the elderly population will be 24.8% by 2041. Cases of cancer show a steady and significant increase within a short time span between 2008 and 2018, and within the reference period, morbidity and mortality due to neoplasms have increased by 49.2% and 64.4%, respectively. Sri Lanka is going through unprecedented economic turmoil, which has resulted in dire consequences for the general public, particularly marginalized groups like low-income groups and senior citizens. Against this backdrop, this study was based on the research problem of perceiving the complex facets of suffering experienced by elderly cancer patients from an emic perspective. The study's specific objectives were to investigate various dimensions of suffering while capturing the most and least common experiences of suffering from an emic perspective. This was a pure qualitative investigation, and the study involved 59 interviews with in-house and clinical patients at the National Institute of Cancer and Oncology Clinics in five districts of Sri Lanka. Ethical clearance was granted by the Ethical Clearance Committee, Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka. NVivo software was employed in qualitative data analysis. Open coding resulted in 38 codes, later refined into four focused thematic categories: physical, psychological, social, and economic dimensions of suffering. Dieting problems, pain due to treatments, a weak body, and concurrent illness were the most felt physical aspects of suffering, while death anxiety, waiting for a diagnosis, anxiety over treatments, and worrying about a cure remain the most felt psychological aspects of suffering. Worries about family, "hiding it," and feeling socially powerless are the most felt social dimensions of suffering, while treatment and test expenses, being unemployed, a shortage of drugs in hospitals, and transportation costs are the most felt economic aspects of suffering. According to research, elderly cancer patients are least concerned about hospital facilities and the quality of healthcare workers.

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