

Physicians' Behavior Towards Cancer Patients Based on Islamic Teachings

Abstract

Illness and health issues have always been one of the greatest concerns among human beings. One of the most devastating illnesses that claims the lives of numerous people worldwide each year is cancer. Cancer usually requires a long period of treatment and procedures and is considered a serious disease. One of the requirements of medicine is ethics, which preserves the patients' dignity and confirms the scientific competence and ability of doctors. This descriptive-analytical study examined ethical issues in the medical profession and how physicians treat cancer patients, such as the sense of responsibility, confidentiality, building hope, and sharing information regarding the patient's health. Professional ethics has always been of special interest in Islam. This study deals with understanding the patients and their needs according to Islamic teachings. The result of the study showed that respecting the ethics of the medical profession builds hope in patients and helps with the treatment procedure.

Keywords: Medical ethics, Cancer, Islamic teachings, Disease, Hope.

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1. Introduction

Health and well-being are of God's greatest blessings to all human beings and health and medical issues have always threatened human beings since early times. People with good hygiene are less likely to get sick, hence, they can enjoy their health.

Not all diseases are on the same level of seriousness; rather, some are treated in a short amount of time and some overwhelm the person for many years. Cancer is one of the most devastating diseases that are responsible for taking the lives of many people around the world each year.

The present study uses a descriptive-analytical method to examine the treatment of cancer patients by focusing on the physicians' behavior and ethical issues based on Islamic teachings.

2. Medical ethics

Ethics refers to the virtues and inner nature of man (Acevedo 2018). Ethics also refers to good and bad deeds as well as the knowledge of human virtues (Tusi, 1413 AH, p. 33). Professional ethics is specifically a set of behavioral performance (do's and don'ts) (Jang, Hwang et al. 2021). Respecting work and professional ethics depends on an individual's worldview, knowledge, and ability (Moinuddin, Hirani et al. 2021). Due to the sensitivity and importance of medical science, the dimension of ethics is highly regarded and the physicians' relationship with the patients, neglect of material gain, confidentiality, and respect for the patient's opinions must be taken seriously. This will lead to the development of professional ethics in society and create a safe environment as well as commitment (Varkey 2021).

Professional ethics have always been of special interest in Islam. Imam Ali (AS) considers a person's profession to be the trust built between two parties (Mir Azimi, Jamei et al. 2021).

The final goal in religious ethics is approaching God and his satisfaction. Ethics is one of the necessities of medicine that validates the physicians' scientific capacities and abilities and preserves the patients' dignity (Alotaibi 2021).

Since the medical profession deals with human lives, honor, and privacy, it has special customs and rules that must be observed and are necessary for a Muslim physician to respect. A brief reference to the most important ethical behaviors is discussed in the following section.

3. Ethics in the medical profession regarding cancer patients

3.1. Responsibility

One of the most important and basic medical ethics is the sense of responsibility; because it compels the physician to observe moral, legal, and religious duties concerning the patient and their treatment.

Imam Sadegh (AS) has quoted an interesting statement about a physician's responsibility from Jesus (PBUH):

«إِنَّ التَّارِكَ شِفَاءَ الْمَجْرُوحِ مِنْ جِرْحِهِ شَرِيكَ لِجَارِحِهِ لَا مَحَالَةَ»

“One who treats the wound is a partner of the one who created the wound”. This statement is based on a clear logic that not only the followers of Islam and Christianity but also physicians cannot conscientiously deny. Therefore, physicians must be very cautious about their responsibilities (Ghazali, 1403 AH, vol. 4, p. 414; Feyz Kashani, 1417 AH, vol. 7, p. 433).

3.2. Confidentiality and privacy

Among the most important medical practices is confidentiality. Some patients prefer to keep their disease private from others. Islamic narrations advise patients not to hide their illness from a professional. Imam Ali (AS) states:

«مَنْ كَتَمَ مَكْنُونًا دَانَهُ عَجَزَ طَبِيبُهُ عَنْ شِفَائِهِ»

“Physicians cannot cure ones who hide their pain” (Ehya Olum Al-Din, Vol 1, pp.169 & 209).

On the other hand, physicians strive to be creditable and not betray the patient by disrespecting their right to confidentiality. It is stated in a Prophetic Hadith:

«المجالس بالأمانة وإفشاء سرّ أخيك خيانة؛ فاجتنب ذلك»

(Tusi, 1414, AH, p. 537, 1162; Tabarsi, 1991: vol. 2, p. 379, 2661; Majlisi, 1403 AH vol. 77, p. 89, 3). Confinement is important and exposure is betrayal. Avoid it at all costs (Alyanak 2020).

Privacy means limiting access to a person’s body or thoughts and feelings. It is closely related to normative values and what people normally want to preserve, protect and control (Nissenbaum 2020). The principle of medical confidentiality is one of the most important ethical duties which dates back to ancient times.

The issue of confidentiality has been given great importance in Islam too, and it deserves more emphasis in the field of medicine and doctor-patient relationships. The Holy Prophet (PBUH) states: “Whoever preserves a Muslim’s secret to himself, God will preserve his secrets in this world and the hereafter”. Imam Sajjad (AS) says: “I will sacrifice my flesh to make Shiites aware of the importance of respecting one’s privacy” (Parsa, 2009, p. 443).

Physicians must respect their patient’s privacy, protect them, and be more insistent on confidentiality than the patient himself (Balthazar, Harri et al. 2018). Many countries have enacted laws and regulations in addition to professional codes and instructions regarding privacy and confidentiality (Tiruneh, Ayele et al. 2019). They have even claimed penalties for violators in some cases (Gracindo and Moreno 2018).

Exposure and disclosure is an example of violations that Islam strictly forbids and considers an act of betrayal. Betrayal occurs when one invades a person’s privacy and exposes their private issues without their permission (Ghanizadeh, 2018, p. 65).

Surah Al-Mu'minun verse 8 and Surah Al-Ma'arij verse 32 point to the observance of trust as one of the attributes of believers. Verse 27 of Surah Al-Infal warns believers against betrayal and violating trust. It has been narrated by Imam Ali (AS) that: “Whoever reveals a secret that he has been trusted with is a traitor” (Tamimi, 1410 AH, p. 98).

Confidentiality for patients is a right (Hartigan, Cussen et al. 2018). The Holy Quran emphasizes not to invade people’s privacy and recommends and warns people against negative suspicions, let alone bad actions. This has been emphasized in verse 12 of Surah Al-Hujurat (Nargesi Khorramabadi, 2012, p. 58).

3.3. Building hope

It is suggested that hopelessness and despair aggravate the disease and becomes more painful for the patient than the disease itself. According to Imam Ali (AS):

«أَعْظَمُ الْبَلَاءِ انْقِطَاعُ الرَّجَاءِ» “The greatest calamity is the cessation of hope”.

Sometimes lack of hope leads to death. As Imam Ali (AS) says: «قَتَلَ الْقُتُوطُ صَاحِبَهُ»

“Hopelessness kills the owner of the emotion” (Tamimi, 1410 AH, p. 113, 6823).

Despair can kill the patient and hope for a cure reduces the amount of suffering and consequences of the disease. In addition, it gives the power to overcome the disease and accelerate treatment. Therefore, a physician’s duty, especially in the case of life-threatening diseases, is to strengthen the patient’s mood and help build hope. The best way to accomplish this is to strengthen religious attitudes, trust in God, and believe in the fact that God is the true physician and he is capable of curing and healing all illnesses and pain; because God Almighty wants the best for human beings (Alyanak 2020).

Hope plays an important role in mental health. Hope gives meaning to life, and when facing problems, misfortunes, sufferings, and sorrows, it prevents psychological collapse and domination of despair. Without hope, life is meaningless, effort is unreasonable, and anxiety and depression are justified as they lead to dark and ambiguous thoughts about the future (Kaplick, Chaudhary et al. 2019).

3.3.1. Hope and optimism

3.3.1.1. Avoiding dead ends

A hopeful person never finds himself at a dead end and always moves towards the light no matter the depths of darkness, problems, and daily sufferings. Perhaps one of the reasons that suicide is forbidden in Islam and other religions is that it represents losing hope in God. Suicide is a sign of extreme hopelessness where one believes all doors are closed. Islam does not allow such perception of one’s existence and others. Islam teaches human beings that God has not left the man alone in this world and is always by their side.

The Quran prohibits feeling hopeless and says:

(قُلْ يَا عِبَادِيَ الَّذِينَ أَسْرَفُوا عَلَىٰ أَنفُسِهِمْ لَا تَقْنَطُوا مِن رَّحْمَةِ اللَّهِ)

“Despair not of the Mercy of Allah” (Al-Zumr: 53)

In another verse, the Quran strongly condemns despair of God’s mercy, and refers to it as disbelief in God:

(مَنْ يَقْنَطُ مِن رَّحْمَةِ رَبِّهِ إِلَّا الضَّالُّونَ)

“Who loses hope in God’s mercy but the misguided? (Al-Hajar: 56).

In another verse God says:

(وَلَا يَيْبَسُ مِن رَّوْحِ اللَّهِ إِلَّا الْقَوْمُ الْكَافِرُونَ)

“Only disbelievers will despair of God’s mercy” (Al-Yusuf: 87).

3.3.1.2. Increasing mental energy

It has been observed in races or track and field events that mental energy increases significantly when participants see the finish line signs. The person who feels exhausted will power up once realizing how close he is to the finish line. It can be argued that the closer one gets to the finish line, the more hope is built; that is, they hope to win and finish the race means showcasing one's abilities. Hope can increase psychic energy leading to an increase in an effort to reach one's goal.

3.3.1.3. Reducing fear and anxiety

Losing hope in accomplishing daily activities will lead to fear and anxiety about the future. The only thing that can control these negative emotions is hope. A religious person believes in Islamic science and values, knows that God controls everything and can do anything, turn bad into good, and frees man from the humiliation of sin through repenting. God has the power to rule the universe with wisdom and prudence. A believer will not have the slightest reason for despair.

Imam Ali (AS) states: "Be aware! All suffering comes to an end; building hope helps in affairs and is of higher regard than sorrow and anxiety and reaching one's goal" (Kaplick, Chaudhary et al. 2019).

In addition to treating patients' physical needs, a physician must be aware of their mental needs as well. Due to the special conditions of cancer patients and their unfavorable mental state, ignoring mental needs leads to the aggravation of the disease which inevitably overwhelms the patient. A very important mental need in such circumstances is the need to build hope and strengthen the patients' spirit. Islam calls on physicians to give patients moral support so they find the power to overcome the disease and accelerate the treatment phase. The Holy Prophet (PBUH) states: "When treating a patient, lift his spirit; for this might not change fate and destiny, but it will purify their soul" (Majlisi, 1403 AH, p. 244).

3.3.1.4. Optimal treatment

A person admitted to the hospital should be treated with respect and any sarcastic and ambiguous behaviors must be avoided at all costs (Limbu, Pham et al. 2020). Being away from home and forced into an unfamiliar environment, meeting strangers, fear of illness, and sometimes surgery results in anxiety. This patient needs patience and compliance from others more than ever.

Optimal treatment reduces the fears and helps the patient feel calm and be optimistic about his illness and treatment. On the other hand, people need love, affection, and friendship, and this need is of more importance in patients (Ishaqi, 2005, p. 3).

People should not and cannot be indifferent to each other in an Islamic community, because life is based upon love and care.

This affection is felt more concerning the elderly and the sick (Majlisi, 1403 AH, p. 274). The Holy Prophet states: "Respecting others with loving words removes one's struggles and troubles, and he will forever have God's infinite mercy as long as he continues to do so" (Klini, 2003, p. 206).

Imam Ali (AS) gives an instructive statement in this regard: "Mildness and tolerance with others is the key to happiness" (Nargesi Khorramabadi, 2012, p. 55). Imam Sadegh (AS) also says: "There are two groups of people: one who are sick and the other who is in health. Have mercy on the sick and console them, and thank God for your well-being and health (Ishaqi, 2005, p. 4).

The relationship between a physician and his patient is at the center of this profession (Light and Levine 2019)light. Moral dignity and ethics in the medical world are at a critical and crucial stage when it comes to treating patients. The more humane, moral, emotional, sincere, honorable, and respectful this attitude is, the more satisfaction and ease of mind the patient acquires (Akrami, Karimi et al. 2018).

Imam Ali (AS) states: "Be kind to people, like a doctor who treats his patients with medicine" (Majlisi, 1404 AH, p. 53).

Imam Sadegh (AS) also states: "Avoid any disturbance and hate towards patients" (Ameli, 2007, p. 51).

3.3.1.5. Attention to spiritual aspects and effects of the disease

Distracting the patients to focus more on the spiritual effects of the disease is one of the accelerating factors in recovery. Informing the patient of God's rewards after enduring illness eases suffering and pain, and finally builds hope that his soul will be free of suffering and his body free from illness.

Islam pays special attention to health and disease as tools for achieving spirituality. The Prophet (PBUH) states: "No Muslim female or male struggles an illness unless they are being forgiven for their sins". The pain one endures in illness will be rewarded by God Almighty. In a common narration from Imam Baqir (AS) and Imam Sadegh (AS) it is stated that: "Being awake for one night due to sickness is superior to one whole year of worship" (Nargesi Khorramabadi, 2012, p. 98). Narrations such as the above does not refer to the superiority of disease over health in Islam, rather, it refers to believers' constant request for health from God, and these requests are evident in their prayers. These narrations point to hope and strengthening mental health in order to overcome illness and regain health, not their superiority.

3.4. Sharing information with the patient regarding their disease and health

Studies show that in Lebanon, physicians who graduated from Western countries prefer to act in accordance with the prevailing culture and values of society and avoid direct

sharing of information with the patients (Atighetchi, 2007, p. 53). The Lebanese Code of Medical Ethics (1994), paragraph 44, warns physicians against announcing the diagnosis of a deadly disease (Blackhall, 1995, p. 36). This code also emphasizes the patient's right to be informed about their conditions. As a result, most physicians prefer to share information with the patient's close relatives. In 1995 a study was conducted that examined 212 physicians (mostly oncologists) in Beirut and the suburbs. The results showed that 47% of the physicians shared the truth with the patients while 53% concealed it (Platt, Jacobson et al. 2018).

The clinical instructions of the British National Service require the following steps to be taken in presenting bad news to patients (Heidari, 2010, p. 44):

- 1) **Preparation:** Knowledge about necessary information regarding the patient before talking to them and providing a suitable space, and if necessary, accompanying them.
- 2) **What does the patient already know?** Getting information from the patient is a good way to start.
- 3) **Does the patient want more information?** It should be noted that the physicians' words may be daunting to the patient at times.
- 4) **A warning shot:** Using warning-like sentences such as "Your disease is serious, or threatening" and evaluating the patient's reaction.
- 5) **Allowing the patient to deny the situation:** Sometimes the patient's first reaction to hearing bad news is denial. Allow the patient to determine the extent of information they want to receive.
- 6) Adequate explanation of the disease if requested by the patient.
- 7) Listening to the patient's concerns and issues that may be important to him at that moment. Ask them to clarify their concerns.
- 8) Encourage the patient to embrace their emotions and express empathy.
- 9) Summarize, plan and give hope regarding the cure for the disease.
- 10) Availability for further explanation or support if needed.

Providing the patient with correct information, including the course of the disease, treatment method, side effects and benefits of each method, the probability of success, and the risks of refusing treatment is necessary. If the patient is not able to make a beneficial decision, or if informing the patient leads to psychological damage and delay in treatment, the information should be provided to the patient's parents and their decision will be considered as the beginning step of the treatment procedure.

Being said, providing mentally and physically sick patients with such information can sometimes have a negative effect on their relationship with the physician or other members of the treatment team. Few studies show that giving information to the patient does not necessarily increase anxiety, frustration, sadness, depression, fear, or even insomnia. The physician must not hide the truth, but providing the whole truth in all cases is not recommended (Wu, Wang et al. 2021). The amount of information the physicians give should be calculated and suitable for the patient's level of understanding and needs.

Conclusion

This research studied physicians' behaviors and attitudes in treating cancer patients with a focus on ethics such as the sense of responsibility, confidentiality, building hope, and sharing information regarding the patients' health based on their mental and physical needs according to Islamic teachings (provided in the Holy Quran and some narrations by the Infallibles). The results indicate that the observance of professional ethics by physicians builds hope in cancer patients which accelerates the treatment procedure.

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Ethics statement

None

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