

## Reporting of attitudes- a systematic review and quantitative analysis of research publications in palliative care journals

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### Abstract

**Objective:** This study aimed to perform a quantitative analysis of research publications in palliative care journals for reporting of articles on attitudes.

**Settings and Design:** Systematic review of palliative care journals

**Methods :** Twelve palliative care journals were searched for articles with 'attitudes' in title of the articles published from 2006-2011. The reporting rates of all journals were compared. The selected articles were categorized into assessment and treatment which were subsequently grouped into original and review articles. The original articles were sub-grouped into qualitative and quantitative studies, and the review articles were grouped into narrative and systematic reviews. Each subgroup of original articles category was further classified according to study designs and target sample populations.

**Results:** The overall reporting rate among all journals was 2.06% (59/2854) and Indian Journal of Palliative Care (IJPC) had the highest reporting rate of 3.70% (4/108) followed by BMC Palliative Care (BMCPC) at 3.37% (3/89), and Palliative Medicine (PM) at 2.91% (14/481).

**Conclusions:** The overall reporting rate for 'attitudes' articles in palliative care journals were 2.06% and there were no randomized clinical trials and systematic reviews found. The study findings indicate a lack of adequate evidence base for attitudes in palliative care literature.

**Key-words:** evidence-based palliative care, research, journal reporting, publication trend, attitudes.

### INTRODUCTION

Palliative care setting demands a strong inter-personal communication and a working relationship between care staff, professionals, patients and their caregivers.<sup>[1]</sup> The first and foremost factor influencing an individual's participation in a palliative care team is his or her own attitudes both towards palliative care in general and for issues,<sup>[2]</sup> arising in a palliative and end-of-life care situation like life, death and dying,<sup>[3]</sup> care of dying,<sup>[4]</sup> communication,<sup>[5]</sup> clinical decisions,<sup>[6]</sup> use of opioids,<sup>[7]</sup> end-of-life referrals,<sup>[8]</sup> interventional pain management,<sup>[9]</sup> and euthanasia amongst many others.<sup>[10]</sup>

Attitudes are product of various sociocultural and demographic factors which may act both as facilitators or barriers to current palliative care practice and thus bring about changes in practice of care.<sup>[11]</sup> Attitudes towards dying patients determine to a large extent, the pattern of physicians' referral to palliative care units.<sup>[12]</sup> Interpersonal attitudes transform into inter-professional relationships which are built upon by individual palliative care team member's attitudes. Research on end-of-life attitudes would enable enhancement of knowledge in specific domains of care.<sup>[13]</sup>

The development of palliative care is proceeding rapidly in some areas of the world, but major problems continue to exist in several countries and regions. Comparative research evidence to inform palliative care development is limited and can be difficult to obtain, especially for resource-poor settings.<sup>[14]</sup>

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Despite recent advances in assessment and management, major issues relating to palliative care for patients and their families remain unanswered. Several challenges face researchers in this area. There were administrative issues, including historical development, funding, academic recognition, integration of services, and cooperation among different centres.<sup>[15]</sup>

The one single-most influencing factor for the above-mentioned sequelae of challenges facing palliative care practice and research,<sup>[16,17]</sup> is attitudes and change of attitudes by itself could be the first step that can lead to effective and efficient palliative care education, practice, research and administration.

Evidence-based palliative care (EBPC) involved integrating effective research findings with clinical expertise and patient preferences towards better individualized provision of palliative care for patients.<sup>[18]</sup> One of the main causes for lack of quality in provided care for terminally ill patients in an era of evidence-informed/ evidence-based practice is the lack of adequate research evidence,<sup>[19]</sup> and this may be due to four possible reasons: lesser studies being conducted on such population, publication of lesser number of studies, sociocultural and ethical issues and reporting characteristics of such studies.<sup>[20,21]</sup>

Previously published studies on analysis of palliative care journals were on reporting of moral problems (ethical issues),<sup>[22]</sup> euthanasia,<sup>[23]</sup> chaplains and community-based clergy,<sup>[24,25]</sup> and, religion and spirituality,<sup>[25-27]</sup> cancer pain,<sup>[28]</sup> pediatric palliative care,<sup>[29]</sup> and quality of life.<sup>[30]</sup> The objective of this paper was to perform a quantitative analysis of research articles on 'attitudes' published in palliative care journals over the past five years.

#### Subjects and Methods

##### Search strategy and criteria

Journals indexed in MEDLINE with name 'palliative' were included and searched that were published from 1<sup>st</sup>

December 2006 till 30<sup>th</sup> November 2011 for English abstracted papers with ['attitudes'] in [title] of the paper.

#### Data synthesis

The total number of articles in all the selected journals was taken as N. The number of included articles ( $N_1$ ) based on search criteria were compared with total number of published articles (N) to obtain reporting rates ( $N_1/N\%$ ) for each journal.

The journals were categorized broadly into multidisciplinary, medical, nursing and other (social work) categories of palliative care journals. The included studies were categorized under assessment and treatment studies and then sub-categorized into original articles and review articles. The original articles were then again grouped into qualitative and quantitative studies and both of them were then sub-grouped based upon study designs. Number of articles reported in each of the final subgroups was computed and compared. The procedure of data synthesis is explained in the schematic flowchart (figure-1). Simultaneously categorical grouping was extended to target population (healthcare professionals/students and patients/caregivers).

#### Data analysis

Descriptive analysis using frequencies for number of studies with respective percentiles was used for reporting characteristics and was done using 95% confidence interval by SPSS for Windows version 11.5 (SPSS Inc, IL).

### RESULTS

#### Overall journals' characteristics

The study included twelve palliative care journals with a total number of 2854 articles. On first level, there were 59 abstracts that were included for final analysis.

There were 59 articles that were on 'attitudes' thus making the overall reporting rate to be 2.06% (figure-2). The twelve journals were AJHPC- Am J Hosp Palliat Care; BMCPC-BMC Palliat Care; COSPC- Curr Opin Support Palliat Care; IJPC- Indian J Palliat Care; IJPN- Int J Palliat Nurs; JHPN- J Hosp Palliat Nurs; JPPCP- J Pain Palliat Care Pharmacother; JPC- J Palliat Care; JPM- J Palliat Med; JSWELPC- J Soc Work End Life Palliat Care; PM- Palliat Med; and, PSC- Palliat Support Care.

Individually AJHPC had 9 articles,<sup>[31-39]</sup> BMCPC had three articles,<sup>[40-42]</sup> COSPC had one article,<sup>[43]</sup> IJPC had four articles,<sup>[44-47]</sup> IJPN had eight articles,<sup>[48-55]</sup> JPC had two articles,<sup>[56,57]</sup> JPM had 11 articles,<sup>[58-68]</sup> JPPCP had one article,<sup>[69]</sup> JSWELPC had one article,<sup>[70]</sup> PM had 14 articles,<sup>[71-84]</sup> and PSC had five Articles,<sup>[85-89]</sup> on 'attitudes.' Also refer to table-1 for respective reporting rates for journals and figure-3 for comparison of number of 'attitudes' articles and other articles between the journals.

Of the selected journals, seven were multidisciplinary (AJHPC, BMCPC, COSPC, IJPC, JPC, JPPCP, PSC), two were medical (JPM, PM), two were nursing (IJPN, JHPN), and one was other (social work- JSWELPC). The reporting rate for articles in nursing journals was highest at 2.25% (8/355) followed by multidisciplinary journals at 2.15% (24/1113) and medical journals at 1.94% (26/1334).

Of all the 59 included studies, there were 56 original articles.<sup>[31-42,44-68,70,71,73-89]</sup> and three review articles.<sup>[43,69,72]</sup> The two systematic reviews were on artificial hydration by Raijmakers et al<sup>[43]</sup> and on euthanasia by McCormack et al<sup>[72]</sup> respectively, while the third review was a narrative review<sup>[69]</sup> on cultural transformation in pain management.

The 57 original articles comprised of 55 assessment/evaluation studies<sup>[44,81]</sup> and two treatment/intervention studies.<sup>[44,81]</sup> Of the two intervention

studies, palliative care training<sup>[44]</sup> and end-of-life education,<sup>[81]</sup> were reported for their effects on attitudes in physiotherapy students,<sup>[44]</sup> and medical students/healthcare workers<sup>[81]</sup> towards palliative care<sup>[44]</sup> and death respectively.<sup>[81]</sup>

The 55 assessment/evaluation studies included three quantitative studies<sup>[33,49,88]</sup> and 52 qualitative studies.<sup>[31,32,34-42,45-8,50-68,70,71,73-80,82-7,89]</sup> The three quantitative studies were development and validation of measurement tools- Euthanasia attitude scale (EAS) and Life attitudes profile-revised,<sup>[88]</sup> and application of EAS in Flemish nurses.<sup>[49]</sup> All the 52 qualitative (assessment) studies were cross-sectional studies.<sup>[31,32,34-42,45-8,50-68,70,71,73-80,82-7,89]</sup>

The 52 cross-sectional (assessment, qualitative) studies comprised of studies targeting care managers,<sup>[31,67,79]</sup> generalpopulation,<sup>[32,80,89]</sup>carestaff,<sup>[34,35,48,56,64,73,74]</sup>healthcareprofessionals,<sup>[35,50,57,71]</sup>physicians,<sup>[36,39,45,47,52,58,62,66,68,72,75,76,78,79,85,86,89]</sup>nurses,<sup>[37,39,45,48,51,52,53,55,70,77,79,82,85,87]</sup>patients,<sup>[38,41,60,63,73]</sup>medical students,<sup>[40,59,61,65,83,84]</sup>medical ethics experts,<sup>[42]</sup>nursing students,<sup>[46,54]</sup>and social workers.<sup>[70]</sup> The comparison of number of studies based upon target sample populations is shown in figure-4. More studies were reported on physicians (27%) followed by nurses (22%) and care staff (11%).

### DISCUSSION

This review is the first of its kind focused on quantitative analysis of palliative care journals for their reporting on 'attitudes'. Attitude is a psychological attribute of the person or people under consideration which is an integrated function of biopsychosocial factors related both to personal and professional roles of the individual(s).<sup>[90]</sup> Although broadly categorized into positive and negative attitudes, it is often an umbrella term used and grouped together with knowledge, beliefs, needs and experiences. This study found a reporting rate lesser than that of previous quantitative analyses on cancer pain, pediatric palliative care and quality of life. The reason might be attributed to the lesser emphasis on psychosocial factors in palliative care research compared to disease or outcomes. This opens up new opportunities for further research in palliative care utilizing attitudes as outcomes in prospective longitudinal intervention studies.

Amongst a few limitations such as the study sample included only palliative care journals indexed in MEDLINE, which it is assumed to be the most authentic and most widely searched database till date. Whether palliative care professionals refer palliative care journals the most, is another topic to be explored in future research. The search strategy used in this study would be assumed to be valid since there existed no previous validated methods to search palliative care journals. This study used the search terms in title, whilst using them in title OR abstract would have yielded different results. However, if the term is not listed in title, we could least assume that it was emphasized in the study per se. The search strategy included 'English' articles as part of per-protocol method and not for excluding non-English journals/articles. There are also no non-English articles and/or journals in the field of palliative care in PubMed.

Whilst this study found palliative care journals' reporting rates, findings from other journals (medical, psychology, nursing and oncology) might be quite different and comparison between such journal categories would provide directions for an evidence-based palliative care clinician and an informed patient/caregiver equally as well. Studies on family caregiver attitudes were absent, and this is somewhat surprising when a greater emphasis was given to caregiver knowledge.<sup>[91]</sup> Future research on reporting education and/or training programs would enable curricular

**Table-1: Comparison of reporting rates of articles on 'attitudes' among palliative care journals**

Journals (2006-2011)	Total number of articles, N	Articles on attitudes in Title $\frac{N_1}{N}$	Reporting rate (%), $\frac{N_1}{N}$
AJHPC <sup>d</sup>	412	9	2.18%
BMCPC <sup>d</sup>	89	3	3.37%
COSPC <sup>d</sup>	205	1	.48%
IJPC <sup>d</sup>	108	4	3.70%
IJPN <sup>c</sup>	345	8	2.31%
JHPN <sup>c</sup>	10	0	0%
JPC <sup>d</sup>	97	2	2.06%
JPM <sup>d</sup>	657	11	1.67%
JPPCP <sup>d</sup>	196	1	.51%
JSWEOLPC <sup>u</sup>	52	1	1.92%
PM <sup>d</sup>	481	14	2.91%
PSC <sup>d</sup>	202	5	2.47%
Total	2854	59	2.06%

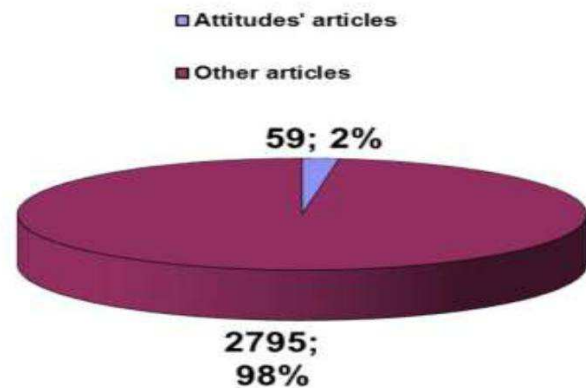


**Figure-1: Schematic flowchart for data synthesis used in this**

modifications in professional education and effective public health strategy.

The implications of this study's findings are multidimensional- attitudes have an inter-related reflection and exchange of thoughts, perceptions, views, opinions and information in a clinician-patient relationship, educator-student relationship, researcher-participant relationship, and provider-public relationships.<sup>[92]</sup> This analysis of attitudes had thrown light on the missing amount of research in these various dimensions and their interactions (for example: clinicians attitudes towards research),<sup>[93]</sup> in palliative care.

The methodological challenges,<sup>[94]</sup> of researching the

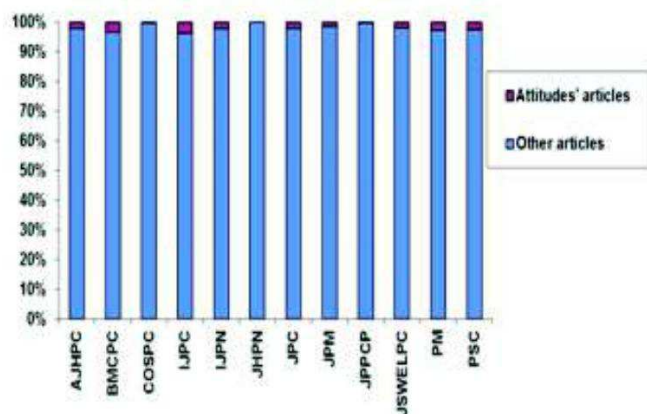


**Figure-2: Overall prevalence of reporting 'attitudes' (reporting rate) in all the palliative care journals**

healthcare experiences of palliative care patients are: defining a 'palliative care patient'; negotiation of access via healthcare professionals, the choice of appropriate data collection tools and methods; the consequences of high attrition rates, and frequent use of retrospective surveys of bereaved relatives. The heterogeneity of the palliative care population represents structural challenges to research methodology, including study design, informed consent (and ethical issues in general), assessment and classification of symptoms and signs, as well as practical issues in the clinic.<sup>[95]</sup> Conducting research on families of individuals receiving palliative care has conceptual challenges: issues include defining the family, determining the unit of analysis in the level of inquiry, and identifying pathways to knowledge about the family. Some of the key areas of research,<sup>[94]</sup> include: patients' and families' experiences of research participation, the impact of being approached on those who decline, how the characteristics of those who participate differ from those who do not and the likely impact of this on findings.

**CONCLUSION**

The overall 5-year prevalence in reporting of articles on 'attitudes' was 2.06% among the 12 palliative care journals reviewed in this study. Studies on change of attitudes following interventions were less, with no longitudinal studies and only one systematic review was found on assessment of attitudes. The study findings indicate a lack of adequate evidence base for 'attitudes' in palliative care literature and there is more scope for



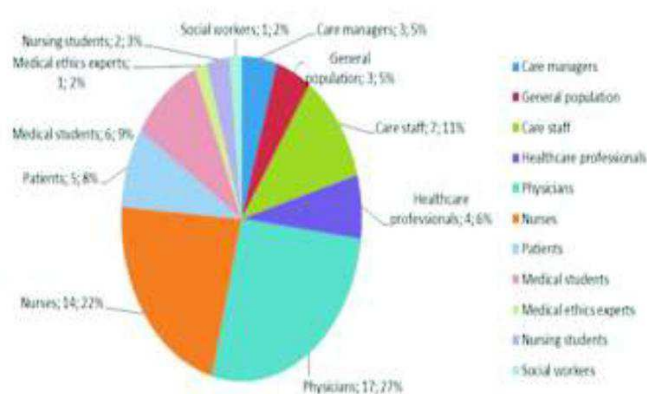
**Figure-3: Comparison of reporting rates of 'attitudes' articles between palliative care journals.**

(AJHPC- Am J Hosp Palliat Care; BMCPC- BMC Palliat Care; COSPC- Curr Opin Support Palliat Care; IJPC- Indian J Palliat Care; IJPN- Int J Palliat Nurs; JHPN- J Hospice Palliat Nurs; JPPCP- J Pain Palliat Care Pharmacother; JPC- J Palliat Care; JPM- J Palliat Med; JSWELPC- J Soc Work End Life Palliat Care; PM- Palliat Med; PSC- Palliat Support Care).

research to base decisions upon understanding and addressing health-related issues and the impact of attitudes.

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**Figure-4: Relative proportion of 'attitudes' articles on assessment based upon target sample populations**  
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