

# *Discussion on Death Education of Terminal Cancer Patients Based on Positive Psychology*

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**Abstract**—In order to speed up the standardization of death education for patients with advanced cancer, this paper discusses the application of death education based on positive psychology in patients with advanced cancer. Through literature review and gradual discussion, this paper defines death education from the perspective of positive psychology, discusses its importance and problems in advanced cancer patients, and finally explores feasible methods to promote death education. Promoting the application of death education in patients with advanced cancer has a long way to go, which requires the joint efforts of the government, medical staff and all sectors of society.

**Keywords**—positive psychology; terminal cancer patients; death education; view of life and death; quality of life

## I. INTRODUCTION

In 2015, the Economist Intelligence Unit released the Quality of Death Index 2015, which used 20 qualitative and quantitative indicators to assess 80 countries. These indicators covered five categories: palliative care and the medical environment, human resources, affordability of medical care, quality of care and level of public participation. The survey results show that China ranks 71st in the quality of death. The quality of death of Chinese people is worrying [1].

In recent years, the overtreatment and quality of life of patients with advanced cancer have attracted much attention. Hospice care, also known as “tranquil care” and “palliative care”, has become a hot topic. The World Health Organization defines palliative care for patients with advanced cancer as follows: “Active and comprehensive medical care for patients whose disease has been ineffective. Control of pain, other symptoms and psychological, social and spiritual problems is paramount. The purpose of palliative treatment is to provide patients and their families with the best quality of life.”

As we all know, terminal cancer patients have urgent need for death education. At the same time, Positive psychology gives us some inspiration in death education. So we discuss death education of terminal cancer patients based on positive psychology.

## II. SPECIFIC CONNOTATION AND SIGNIFICANCE OF DEATH EDUCATION FOR ADVANCED CANCER PATIENTS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

### A. Development course and specific connotation of death education

Death education originated in the United States. It can be traced back to 1928, and its formal rise was in the late 1950s. Pine divides the development of death education in the United States into four periods: the exploration period from 1928 to 1957; the development period from 1958 to 1967; the prosperity period from 1968 to 1976; and the maturity period from 1977 to 1986. By 1995, death education was gradually extended to Hong Kong, Taiwan and other regions of China[2].

The understanding of death education varies from country to country. American scholar Fruehling (1982) believed that death education promoted people’s awareness of death from different levels, such as psychology, spirit, economy, law and so on. Death education is also a preventive education to reduce the variety of problems associated with death and further enhance the appreciation of life. According to the Dictionary of Medical Ethics in China, death education is a kind of education that teaches people how to recognize and treat death, but it is also called “life and death education”, “life education” and “hospice care education” because of cultural taboos and other factors.

### B. Death education from the perspective of positive psychology

Positive psychology is a field of psychological research that emerged in the United States in the 1990s. Positive psychological intervention is a psychological intervention method based on the theory of positive psychology and aimed at exploring the inherent or potential positive qualities and forces of human beings. Psychologist Seligman, the founder of positive psychology, wrote: “When I first became a therapist, I was taught, following the dogma of Sigmund Freud and Arthur Schopenhauer, that the best we can do is not to suffer, so my aim was to help the patient get rid of all of her negatives: anger,

sadness, and anxiety. That done, therapy ended. Once in a while, we did very good work, and these dysphorias cleared up completely. Did I get a happy patient? No, I got an empty patient because the skills of positive emotion, engagement, meaning, and good relationships are entirely different from the skills of fighting anger, anxiety, and depression. So arriving at the good is a lot more than just eliminating the bad.[3]" Based on the theory of positive psychology, death education should not only assist terminal cancer patients to deal with emotional problems such as fear, but also teach them how to live a positive, brave, happy and full life in the limited days.

### C. The significance of death education

There are many studies on the significance of death education, such as Chen Feifei's grouping 134 patients with advanced head and neck cancer. One group adopted routine health education and nursing intervention, the other group carried out death education on this basis. A month later, it was found that the life and death outlook, bad mood and quality of life of the patients receiving death education improved more significantly than those of the control group [4].

Zhou Xiaofeng et al. studied the patients with advanced primary liver cancer. After one week of intervention, the nervousness, anger, depression, self-esteem, panic and other negative emotions of the two groups were alleviated. The patients who received death education were more obvious, which greatly alleviated their fear of death [5].

The research of Zhang Xiaomei et al. also shows that death education has a significant impact on the outlook on life and death and emotional state of patients with advanced cancer, which can effectively improve the quality of life of patients, enhance their awareness of death, and greatly help to eliminate depression, tension and anger of patients [6].

Li Yonghong investigated 65 patients with stage III or IV cancer who had received death education and 65 patients who had not. Among these patients, selected the "death in old age"(26.15%) was significantly higher than that in control group (7.69%), selected "should not maintain a vegetative state" accounted for 23.08%, which was significantly higher than that in control group (7.69%). The difference was statistically significant. The patients who received death education and the patients in the control group were the ones who had bad feelings when thinking about death accounting for 36.92% and 49.23%, respectively. It shows that the death education has increased the patients' psychological endurance of death to a certain extent[7].

In the book *Death Education* co-authored by Eddy and Alles in 1983, a series of more comprehensive view on the importance of Death Education were put forward[8]:1) To help people correctly face their own deaths, individuals can use effective problem-solving techniques to deal with internal conflicts and fear of death; 2) In daily life, music, art and literature describe and publicize death, as well as media report and exaggerate death, while adults do not talk about death. It is more necessary to make us face up to these conflicting information through death education and talk about life and death from a healthy and normal point of view; 3) Because death indicates the end of a person's life, thinking about death

can help people to correctly evaluate their lives and thus encourage people to improve their living conditions; 4) To assist professional or non-professional nursing staffs (including family members) in providing appropriate emotional support to end-of-life patients and bereaved people; 5) To help people who know nothing about death and dying to understand relevant terms, themes and trends; 6) To help people prepare for their death in public: how to make a will, announce what kind of funeral ceremony they wish to choose in the future, and how to deal with the remains; If you are seriously ill, do you still want to continue to "prolong" your life with medicine?

After understanding the disease, cancer patients will have different degrees of psychological disorders and negative emotions. After various treatments, it may not be impossible to control the development of the disease. Accepting death needs to go through an unusually difficult psychological process. At this time, a positive view of death is conducive to alleviating the patients' fear of death and the unknown. After calming their emotions down, patients can be helped to seek the meaning of life actively, summarize the whole life course and face death more calmly. At the same time, it is also conducive to family members to view the death of their loved ones correctly and live through the bereavement period peacefully. It also plays a positive role in motivating young people to know more about the value of life and to focus on doing more meaningful and valuable things.

## III. PROBLEMS IN THE DEATH EDUCATION OF PATIENTS WITH ADVANCED CANCER

### A. Complete death education system is not established in schools

The death education originally comes from the west, while China's death education started late and the development lags behind. In primary and secondary education and even in college education, death education, like sex education, emphasizes theory over practice, forms over contents, and lacks a complete and practical death education program. In class, the teachers may teach vaguely and view death education as the task to complete, do not care about the actual impact on students.

### B. Death education in the medical system has not been truly implemented

The lack of death education in school education has led to a series of problems. Patients and their families lack correct views of death and do not know how to deal with serious emotions. Doctors and nurses can calmly deal with death problems as they are accustomed to seeing death in the hospital, but do not know how to guide patients and their families to actively face the suffering of life. Generally speaking, most hospitals have not set up on-the-job training for death education, and there is a shortage of professionals who can provide death education for patients and their families. In addition, due to the busy business, death education cannot be truly implemented in the medical system.

#### IV. REASONS FOR THE PRESENT SITUATION

##### A. The influence of traditional Chinese culture

In China, many people influenced by traditional Confucianism, regard death as a taboo topic, and either ignore it or keep it secret, or comfort themselves with false illusions. In ancient Chinese education, the view of life and death is mainly “do not know life, how to know death”, which only emphasizes the value of life in a certain aspect, does not emphasize the view of death, and does not explore the meaning of life through death. Because this idea is deeply rooted, it is difficult to really carry out death education.

##### B. All sectors of society fail to realize the importance of death education

Positive psychology, as opposed to negative psychology. Most people in the society adopt an “evasive” attitude towards death. Positive psychology holds that if school teachers, doctors and nurses in charge of hospitals and other influential people adopt a negative attitude, it will affect the attitude of students, patients and their family members to a certain extent. People from all walks of life fail to recognize the necessity of death education and believe that death is inevitable. Therefore, facing death and accepting death are natural things and people do not need special education. In fact, when most people face a sudden death sentence, especially for those with terminal cancer, their general psychological response is very complex. They go through a period of shock denial, anger, negotiation, depression, and finally acceptance. Psychological fear and despair are often difficult to deal with, and this negative emotion will affect the attitude of the next generation of young people towards death, which is not conducive to people's physical and mental health.

#### V. EXPLORE METHODS FOR THE DEATH EDUCATION OF PATIENTS WITH ADVANCED CANCER

##### A. Take a more positive attitude towards Confucian culture

Ideologically, taking a more positive attitude towards Confucian culture is the first step in carrying out death education for patients with advanced cancer. Confucianism attaches great importance to the issue of life and death. Although Confucian scholars do not discuss death too much, they have already had a rational thinking on life and death. The Confucian outlook on life is a kind of natural outlook on life. It is a view of life that knows death from birth and pays attention to “When you live, go with the flow; when you die, go with the flow”. From the perspective of ontology, traditional Confucian culture believes that life and death, as a natural process of the development of a life phenomenon, can constantly change and transform each other, because life and death are the same. Some people think that Confucius's view “do not know life, how to know death” is the avoidance of death. However, through the comments of Confucius and other later scholars, we can see that Confucian tradition is not afraid of death. To live is to keep striving; to die is just to rest. So after a lifetime of struggle, to be able to rest is not something to be sad about or afraid of. Instead of thinking too much about the phenomenon of life and death, we should focus on how to realize the value and ideal in real life and realize the meaning of life [9].

##### B. Establish a sound school education system

Gradually establish a sound school education system for death education, and set up intervention training courses based on positive psychology theory, such as mindfulness therapy, meaning therapy, happiness therapy, hope therapy, humor therapy, etc.[10]. And then cultivate more and more professional talents. At the same time, we should pay attention to the practical application in the medical system and give more humanized hospice care to patients with advanced cancer.

##### C. Take action according to the patient's condition

According to the patient's condition and psychological changes, death education should be carried out in various forms to make the patients understand the diseases correctly and overcome the fear of death[5].

###### 1) Seeking the meaning of life

Seeking the meaning of life can help patients with advanced cancer to alleviate the pain, helplessness and despair of disease. Nurses can make patients understand the meaning of death by talking and discussing, correctly understand and face death; nursing staffs guide patients to review the life process, from childhood to adulthood, and then to every stage of disease diagnosis. Help them recall and describe the profound memory of life, and narrate the feelings and moods at that time to discover the meaning of life. Medical staffs help patients plan for the future, reduce the fear of death, and alleviate their anxiety and tension.

###### 2) Intervention methods of death education

Through the assessment of patients' condition and psychological state, targeted education can be carried out, and death education can be carried out by means of brochures, television and lectures to guide, explain, inspire, encourage and hint patients to communicate actively.

###### 3) Death education intervention content

Instruct patients to learn how to deal with self-loss and obtain positive self-evaluation, make patients realize that life and death are the necessary process of every life, only face up to, cherish and treat life kindly, can they live a significant life; explain the principle of disease for patients, give drug control according to doctor's advice for patients with pain caused by disease; When patients are excessively worried about poor prognosis, family and economy, they should be distracted, encouraged to have conversations with others or participate in activities within their power, develop their own interests and hobbies, so as to improve the quality of life.

##### D. Intensify publicity

Strengthen propaganda and popularize death education to the public. Make the public have a correct understanding of death, and gradually eliminate the mystery, fear and psychological confusion about the issue of life and death. Use positive social atmosphere to influence ward small atmosphere.

#### VI. CONCLUSION

Death education is indispensable for everyone, especially for patients with terminal cancer. If we know more about death, we will have less fear and anxiety. However, due to various reasons, death education has not been popularized. All sectors

of society have treated death education with indifference, which results in a lot of problems. Firstly, complete death education system is not established in schools. Last but not least, death education in the medical system has not been truly implemented.

We should take some measures to make people treat death with a more positive and optimistic attitude and strive to realize the value of life. In the process of death education, four aspects should be emphasized: take a more positive attitude towards Confucian culture, establish a sound school education system, take action according to the patient's condition, and intensify publicity and so on.

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