

Original Article

Improving Communication on Hope in Palliative Care. A Qualitative Study of Palliative Care Professionals' Metaphors of Hope: Grip, Source, Tune, and Vision

Erik Olsman, MA, Wendy Duggleby, PhD, RN, AOCN,
Cheryl Nikolaichuk, PhD, RPsych, Dick Willems, PhD, MA, MD,
Judith Gagnon, RN, Renske Kruizinga, MA, and Carlo Leget, PhD, MA
Section of Medical Ethics (E.O., D.W.), Department of General Practice, Academic Medical Center, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands; Faculty of Nursing (W.D., J.G.) and Division of Palliative Care Medicine (C.N.), Department of Oncology, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada; Department of Medical Oncology (R.K.), Academic Medical Center, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam; and Department of Ethics of Care (C.L.), University of Humanistic Studies, Utrecht, The Netherlands

Abstract

Context. Hope is important in palliative care. However, palliative care professionals' perspectives on hope are not well understood. Metaphors of hope are a way of better understanding these perspectives.

Objectives. To describe palliative care professionals' perspectives on hope by examining the hope metaphors they spontaneously used to describe their own hope and their perspectives on the hope of patients and their families.

Methods. Semistructured interviews with palliative care professionals were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using a narrative approach. Results were discussed until the researchers reached consensus and reinforced by other health-care professionals and by observing several palliative care settings.

Results. The 64 participants (mean (SD) age, 48.42 (9.27) years and 72% female) were physicians (41%), nurses (34%), chaplains (20%), or other professionals (5%), working in Canada (19%) or The Netherlands (81%). Participants described the hope of patients, their families, or themselves as a 1) grip, which implied safety; 2) source, which implied strength; 3) tune, which implied harmony; and 4) vision, which implied a positive perspective. Compared with Dutch participants, Canadian participants generally put more emphasis on spirituality and letting go of their own hope as a grip (safety). Compared with other included professionals, physicians used hope as a grip (safety) most often, whereas chaplains used hope as a tune (harmony) most often.

Conclusion. Our findings help to increase the understanding of hope and contribute to improving communication skills in palliative care

Address correspondence to: Erik Olsman, MA, Section of Medical Ethics, Department of General Practice, Academic Medical Center, University of Amsterdam,

P.O. Box 22700, Amsterdam 1100DE, The Netherlands. E-mail: h.j.olsman@amc.uva.nl

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Key Words

Palliative care, terminal care, communication, physician-patient relations, nurse-patient relations, spirituality, ethics, metaphor, qualitative research

Introduction

Hope is important for palliative care professionals,^{1,2} their patients, and patients' families.³ Within the context of communication on prognosis and end-of-life issues, however, health-care professionals (HCPs) perceive patients' hope as difficult.^{4–6} They sometimes experience an ethical dilemma between maintaining patients' hope and truth telling, which may diminish hope.^{7,8} However, a recent synthesis study describing professionals' perspectives on the hope of palliative care patients indicated that "either maintaining or diminishing hope" was just one way of framing the ethics of hope. Hope could be judged from a variety of perspectives as truthful, helpful, or valuable for patients.⁹ The results of this synthesis study are helpful in understanding HCPs' perspectives on hope and reframing the ethics of hope. However, HCPs' implicit perspectives on hope were not addressed, and additional studies are needed to determine how the findings of this synthesis relate to patients' perspectives on hope.

One way of understanding HCPs' *implicit* perspectives on hope is to analyze their spontaneous use of hope metaphors. A metaphor is figurative language use that "reduces two terms to their shared characteristics, enabling the linguistic transference of one to the other."¹⁰ Metaphors may both hinder and facilitate palliative care communication,^{11–13} and they show, among other things, cultural values and perceptions of a phenomenon.^{10,12,14,15} As a consequence, metaphor analysis offers a way to understand hope and the implications of metaphor use for clinical practice. The aim of our study was to describe palliative care professionals' perspectives on hope by examining their spontaneous use of hope metaphors with respect to their own hope and their perspectives on the hope of patients and patients' families. Our central

question was What metaphors of hope do palliative care professionals use?

Methods

Theoretical Underpinnings

Our study was underpinned by narrative theory, in which hermeneutics and language use are important.^{16–21} Hermeneutics is the study of the interpretation of texts. Hermeneutics within a narrative approach means that people interpret the world and themselves by making use of language, for instance, by telling their story.^{19,20} In their stories, people give meaning to their lives by making use of (shared) language. However, this shared language involves assumptions that include and exclude certain groups, as shown in narrative research among minority groups.²² Metaphors are one form of language use that makes possible certain interpretations while excluding others.

Participant Recruitment and Data Collection

Semistructured interviews were conducted with HCPs in The Netherlands and in Alberta, Canada. Participants were 18 years of age or older and working clinically with palliative care patients for at least the prior six months. Sampling aimed to obtain variation in age, professional background, and gender. Eligible participants were informed about the study through a variety of approaches, such as e-mail listservs and newsletters, and they were sent detailed information by e-mail. Snowball sampling also was used.²³ Canadian participants signed an informed consent form, whereas Dutch participants were only required to give oral consent.²⁴

An interview guide ([Appendix I](#), available from jpsmjjournal.com) of open-ended questions was used and participants were invited to share their experiences without being limited to definitions of hope²⁵ or definitions of

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