



Original Article

Application of signs of dying identified in traditional Chinese, Tibetan, and modern Western medicine in terminal care

Jyh-Gang Hsieh^a, Ying-Wei Wang^{a,b,*}

^aDepartment of Family Medicine, Buddhist Tzu Chi General Hospital, Hualien, Taiwan

^bSchool of Medicine, Tzu Chi University, Hualien, Taiwan

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: The purpose of this study was to promote culturally sensitive hospice care by understanding the concepts of approaching death in traditional Chinese and Tibetan medicine.

Materials and Methods: We searched for information on signs of dying in Western medicine using MEDLINE and the Cochrane Library Database. We conducted in-depth interviews using a semi-structured questionnaire with six traditional Chinese medical doctors qualified to practice both Western and Chinese medicine. A literature review of Chinese and Tibetan medicine included an analysis of the classical textbooks of these traditional medicine systems. The literature was analyzed using qualitative analysis software.

Results: Western medicine uses physiologic phenomena to describe signs of dying, while traditional Chinese medicine believes that signs of dying can be summarized as different symptom complexes and can be used to predict disease prognosis. Tibetan medicine views dying as a complex and interdependent process in which the patient's body and mind simultaneously disintegrate. Traditional Chinese and Tibetan medicine pay more attention to the observable signs of disease.

Conclusions: In Taiwan, Western medicine is the main treatment option delivered during hospice care, but many patients and families are still influenced by traditional medicine concepts. The understanding of traditional medicine can provide culturally sensitive care for terminally ill patients of different cultures.

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1. Introduction

Terminally ill patients show many typical signs and symptoms during the process of death. Apart from being indicators of death, these signs also serve to remind hospice care providers of their responsibilities to these patients. These responsibilities include steps such as ensuring that patients receive proper treatment for their symptoms, ensuring that patients' emotional needs have been adequately addressed, that families can cope with the death of patients, and that funerals have been arranged [1–5]. Thus, an analysis of the signs of dying can help improve hospice care for terminally ill patients.

Patients who are discharged too early may not receive the best terminal care, resulting in enormous care-giving burdens for their

family members. On the other hand, delaying this decision may mean that the patient's wish of dying at home is not fulfilled, causing great regret for family members. This preference for dying at home is common in both Western and Chinese societies [2,6–8]. Thus, identification of patients who are close to death and assessment of decisions to let these patients return home before death have become important topics for medical doctors. Many studies have provided a variety of methods to predict a patient's survival. However, the assessment methods and techniques used in Western medicine studies have many limitations [5,6,9]. Traditional Chinese and Tibetan medicine hold fairly unique and different views from Western medicine on the cause and treatment of disease, as well as on the nature of signs of dying. These ancient medical systems largely depend on observation of the disease process. An understanding of end-of-life concepts in traditional Chinese and Tibetan medicine may enable doctors to more precisely predict the deaths of patients. This information could also allow hospice care givers to provide appropriate care for patients in the last stages of terminal illness. To our knowledge,

Conflict of interest: none.

* Corresponding author. Department of Family Medicine, Buddhist Tzu Chi General Hospital, 707, Section 3, Chung-Yang Road, Hualien, Taiwan. Tel.: +886 83561825x2359; fax: +886 83461865.

E-mail address: ywwang@mail.tcu.edu.tw (Y.-W. Wang).

this is the first study comparing predictions of dying between Western and ancient Asian medicine.

2. Materials and methods

We searched the databases of MEDLINE (January 1966–February 2009) and the Cochrane Library Database for information on signs of dying in Western medicine. The search strategy included the use of terms such as terminally ill, hospice, palliative care, end-of-life, end-stage, and dying. Related articles and references were also hand searched. Our inclusion criteria were articles with a clear observational design, and the dying period was defined as the last hours or days of life. Sample sizes in the included articles ranged from 85 [3] to 882 patients [4]. Most patients included in the research articles died of cancer.

We interviewed six traditional Chinese medical doctors with licenses to practice both Western and Chinese medicine. They all had experience caring for terminally ill patients. The research question posed to them was, “What did you observe during the dying process of patients based on the concepts of traditional Chinese medicine?” We conducted in-depth interviews with these doctors, and some keywords related to the dying process were identified in the interview. Then, we used these key words to perform qualitative analysis with the NVivo 8 software (QSR International Pty Ltd, Australia) and hand-searched Chinese medical literature, including medical textbooks, for information on signs of dying. Using the same criteria, we also searched the Chinese Electronic Periodical Services for Chinese medical research articles. Information from seven classical textbooks that discuss signs of dying and provide information on predicting patients’ deaths was also included [10–16]. These textbooks are regarded as the most important references in traditional Chinese medicine and are used to train traditional Chinese medicine doctors.

The search process to identify signs of dying in Tibetan medicine was similar to that for traditional Chinese medicine and was performed using qualitative analysis software. Information from three books, namely, *The Four Medical Classics* [17], *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* [18], and *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* [19], was included in the study because these references are the major textbooks for training Tibetan medicine doctors.

3. Results

Several clinical features have been identified as indicators of a fast approaching death, but very few studies have investigated the reliability of these signs [6]. In contemporary Western medicine, studies commonly show that the physiologic symptoms of impending death include dyspnea, change in the level of consciousness, pain, and death rattle (Table 1) [3,6,8,20–23]. The reported incidences of respiratory symptoms such as dyspnea and death rattle were 50%–62% [8,21] and 39%, respectively [8]. The mean (median) durations from the onset of death rattle and severe dyspnea (respiration with mandibular movement) to actual death were 57 (23) hours and 7.6 (2.5) hours [20], respectively. The incidence of loss of consciousness within 48–72 hours before death

ranged from 7%–45% [8,21–23], and delirium occurred in 29% of patients [8]. The reported incidences of symptoms varied depending on the underlying disease. For example, only 20% of patients with heart failure or lung cancer lost consciousness [21]. Pain was another important issue for dying patients. About 40%–44% of patients experienced severe pain [8,21]. Analgesic use usually increased as the patient came closer to death [20]. Other common signs included fatigue, cyanotic extremities, absence of pulse in the radial artery, nausea, and vomiting [8,20,21]. In one study, 53% of the patients had three or more of these signs [8]. As the patient came closer to death, the number of severe signs increased [3].

In the analysis of interviews with traditional Chinese doctors, several words or phrases about the dying process, such as dyspnea with a flushed face and staring without focus, were noted. These words were then used as key search words in traditional Chinese literature.

End-of-life symptoms and signs were described in the book *Huangdi Neijing (Yellow Emperor’s Inner Canon)* [10], a significant record on traditional Chinese medicine that was written 2000 years ago. Other important ancient medical texts included the *Shanghanlun (Treatise on Cold Damage Disorders)* [24], the *Maijing (The Pulse Classic)* [11], and the *Four Scholastic Sects of Jin-Yuan Dynasties*, all of which have detailed descriptions of procedures for identification of dying patients. Generally, traditional Chinese medicine does not lay emphasis on a single symptom but stresses a series of syndrome complexes to describe signs of dying. For example, *The Pulse Classic* shows that a syndrome complex comprising dyspnea, vomiting, cellulitis, pressure sores, blindness, pain in the bones, and beads of perspiration indicates death [11]. Traditional Chinese medicine also lays emphasis on the importance of the time of death and draws inferences on the time of death on the basis of different syndrome complexes. For instance, the *Jing Yue Quan Shu (The Complete Works of Zhang Jing-Yue)* states that patients who present with the syndrome complex of deafness, retraction of the scrotum, refusal to eat or drink, and disturbance in consciousness will die in 6 days [12]. An analysis of the traditional Chinese medical literature on signs of dying based on various physiologic systems revealed that the most commonly mentioned symptoms were dyspnea, delirium, cyanosis, panting, and staring without focus [10–13,24]. Some dying signs, such as a ruddy face of a cachexia-affected patient [11,13], a dark-yellowish, dry tongue [11], and a paradoxical pulse [25], are only mentioned in traditional Chinese medical literature. The symptoms of various diseases can be compared with those described in contemporary Western medicine. For instance, the syndrome complex composed of tachypnea, hemoptysis, swelling of the extremities and abdomen, yellowing of the skin, and the inability to speak [11] that has been described to predict death in *The Pulse Classic* are consistent with the end-stage symptoms of liver cirrhosis with esophageal varices described in Western medicine.

Tibetan medicine postulates that all parts of the body will show signs of dying when the patient is close to death. These are divided into distant signs of death and imminent signs of death. Distant signs are mainly symptoms occurring in each organ system, such as nasal flaring, darkening of the tongue, lips turning outward, bulging eyes, and sunken, dark eye sockets [17], which are similar to terminal signs in Western medicine. In Tibetan medicine, the body is considered to be composed of five elements, i.e., earth, water, fire, wind, and space. In the process of dying, the five elements dissolve one after the other (Table 2). The first element to dissolve is earth. As a result, the body becomes weak and loses strength. The mind becomes agitated and delirious. When the water element dissolves, the body begins to lose fluids. The patient experiences faecal and urinary incontinence and dryness in the mouth and throat. When

Table 1
Symptoms and signs of impending death in Western medicine.

Dying sign/symptom	Frequency (%)
Dyspnea	50–6% [8,21]
Death rattle	39 ^b
Change in consciousness	7–45 [8,21–23]
Delirium	29 ^b
Pain	40–44 [8,21]

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