

Spiritual wellbeing, depression and end-of-life despair in elderly persons with terminal cancer

Cancer has been the leading cause of death in Singapore, especially among people over 65 years old. The proportion of Singapore residents aged 65 years and over has increased from 8.7% in 2008 to 13.7% in 2018. This helps explain much of the rising number of cancer cases in recent years. For some elderly cancer patients, impending mortality due to advanced stage of cancer may be associated by depression, anxiety, as well as end-of-life despair. Older adults often depend on their spiritual beliefs to resolve these psychosocial distress. A few existing studies conducted in the Western countries show that spiritual wellbeing protects persons with terminal cancer from depression and end-of-life despair. However, there is scarce information on this important psychosocial topic among Singapore elderly adults with terminal cancer. In this interview, **Dr Srinivasan Chokkanathan**, an Associate Professor from NUS, shares about his recent research addressing the knowledge gap between spiritual wellbeing, depression and end-of-life despair among Singaporean elderly patients with terminal cancer.

Q1: What first sparked your interest in the research on spiritual wellbeing among elderly persons with terminal cancer?

My penchant for strength based social work practice has propelled me to conduct research on use of resources by older adults in adverse circumstances. Given that spirituality is one of core resources during old age and given the lack of information on the association between spirituality and end-of-life despair, I naturally become interested in this area.

Q2: Can you briefly introduce your study and what are the major research findings? Did the results surprise you?

The aim of the study was to find the association between spiritual wellbeing, depression, and desire for hastened death. Older adults with terminal cancer use spirituality to deal with depression, and suicidal ideation.

Q3: For future intervention programs, what do you propose to support elderly patients with terminal cancers? Do you think a regular assessment on patient's spiritual wellbeing is necessary?

Spirituality should form an integral component of assessments where appropriate should also be integrated into the interventions for older adults with terminal cancer.

Q4: Do you have any future research plan based on this study?

We understand that we have but taken a few steps in our long journey. Based on the findings of this study we intend to conduct a large scale survey to determine the complex pathways through which spiritual wellbeing influences end-of-issues in older adults with terminal cancer.

Q5: How did SCS Cancer Research Grant help pave the way for your research in psychosocial area?

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Researcher portfolio

This study was completed by the team led by Dr Srinivasan Chokkanathan, who is an Associate professor from Department of Social Work, National University of Singapore. His research interests are aging and mental health, strength based and resilience social work.

The team members included:

- Dr. Ow Rosaleen, Department of social work NUS.
- Mrs Tan Yee Pin, Head of Department (Psychosocial Oncology)
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