

## HotPick September 2004

### **Systematic review of the problems and issues of accessing specialist palliative care by patients, carers and health and social care professionals**

*Ahmed N, Bestall J, Ahmedzai S, Payne S, Clark D, Noble B.*

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Changing demographics and growing consumer demand for access to quality end of life care is seeing increasing demand for palliative care services. As such, greater attention is being directed towards identifying strategies for ensuring palliative care services can be accessed by all persons requiring such services. While a variety of problems with access to palliative care services have been highlighted in the literature, there has been no systematic assessment of evidence to date. This systematic review aims to identify and assess current evidence to determine problems and issues associated with accessing specialist palliative care by patients, carers and health and social care professionals.

The authors sought to identify a comprehensive list of published and unpublished primary studies. Given the broad nature of the research questions examined in this review, numerous search terms were used and no research methods or outcome measures were excluded from review. The search resulted in 9921 hits, with 40 papers meeting the inclusion criteria. Studies were heterogeneous in terms of methods, results, and outcomes measured. Most studies used qualitative and survey approaches, with no randomised controlled trials identified. Studies were grouped into three major themes: referral and reasons for referral to palliative care; access and use of palliative care services; barriers and obstacles to receiving palliative care. Barriers identified included lack of knowledge and education amongst health care professionals and a lack of standardised referral criteria. Patients from minority ethnic groups, socioeconomically disadvantaged groups, older people and patients with non-malignant conditions were less likely to receive timely referral.

Commentary: Only two of the 40 papers reviewed in this study reported on Australian populations. Nevertheless, the findings support impressions of many service providers that certain sociodemographic groups and patients with non-malignant conditions are less likely to be referred to palliative care. These results emphasise the importance of further education of health care professionals about palliative care, and the need for further research to identify appropriate referral criteria for specialist palliative care. The authors indicate that they are working on developing a screening measure to facilitate appropriate referral to palliative care.

Unlike most similar systematic reviews, the broad range of research methods used in the studies included in this review required that an assessment method that could evaluate both qualitative and quantitative articles be used. The approach thus provides a review framework that may be useful for other research questions in palliative care where high level evidence from randomised controlled trials may not be available.

### **Reviewer**

## **Associate Professor Patsy Yates**

Associate Professor Patsy Yates currently holds the position of Director for the Centre for Palliative Care Research and Education, a Queensland Health funded Centre aimed at advancing palliative care services in Queensland through research and education. She has extensive clinical, education and research experience in cancer and palliative care, her most recent appointments including six years in a joint-academic clinical appointment with the Division of Oncology at Royal Brisbane Hospital and the Faculty of Health, Queensland University of Technology.

Patsy is currently leading a research program aimed at improving management of cancer related symptoms and treatment side effects at all phases of the cancer trajectory. She is currently undertaking funded studies evaluating psychoeducational interventions for people with cancer experiencing cancer pain, breathlessness, and fatigue.