

Session 5: And Peace at the Last Tending to the End of Life

Imagine a movie scene in which
you were dying

What would it look like?

Who would be there?

Where would it take place?

- What do you fear about your own dying process?

What happens?

Physiology

- Heart contractions stop with no movement of blood and consequently no delivery of oxygen to organs including the brain
- Absence of oxygen delivery means organs will not function properly

What happens?

Physiology

- Absence of oxygen has different effects on different body areas but the end result is the same. If sufficient organ failure occurs, then death is unavoidable.

What do people fear about death?

- Most people fear the time period before their death, not the actual event
- Death used to be part of our collective everyday experiences. With societal changes, our current experience is often solely through media sources.

Understanding death

What are people scared about?

Suffering before death including...

- intractable pain
- shortness of breath (drowning)
- inability to communicate one's wishes or needs
- incontinence
- nausea

Symptom management: understanding the problem

- Shortness of breath has many causes
 - low oxygen levels
 - increased respiratory rate due to fever or deconditioning (decreased muscle mass relative to physiologic needs)
 - anxiety
- Optimal treatment depends on the cause

What are people scared about?

Nonphysical symptoms

Vulnerability/Dependence

Dying alone

What are people scared about?

- Vulnerability

Our society emphasizes and encourages the notion that we are invulnerable to any health problems and that all problems are fixable. Problems can occur when there is a disconnect between our perceptions and the reality of human existence.

Disconnect between cultural expectations and human reality

- Death represents a failure of medical care
- All health problems can be fixed
- No one will ever suffer and all symptoms can be alleviated
- Death is a reality for all humans
- Not all health problems can or should be fixed
- Most symptoms can be greatly alleviated

- Where does palliative care fit?
- Where does hospice fit?

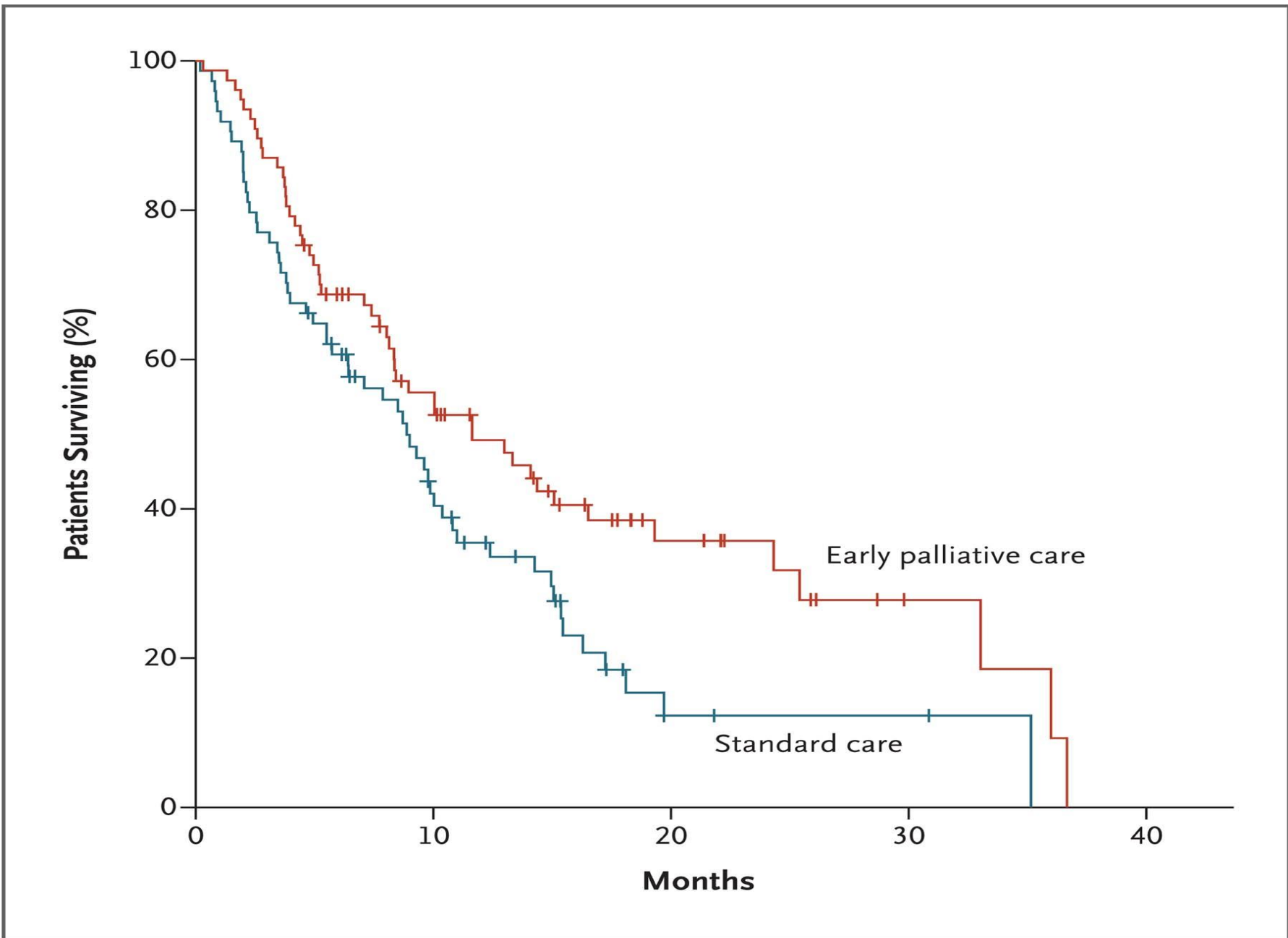
Symptom management is very important

- Recent article in the New England Journal of Medicine shows value of early, regular assessment and treatment of symptoms.
- All patients in this study had standard medical therapies for lung cancer. The only difference was the EARLY use of supportive care.

Early Palliative Care for Patients with Metastatic Non–Small-Cell Lung Cancer

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NEJM article

- Patients receiving early palliative care had less aggressive care at the end of life (more frequent and earlier referral to hospice and less chemotherapy in the last 2 weeks of life) and... had a longer survival (11.6 months vs. 8.9 months, $p=0.02$)
- What does this study really show?

Going Deeper

- When was a time you had to give up control in your life?
- Psalm 30:5 reminds us that “weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.” How does the temporal nature of suffering inform your thoughts/feelings about the end of life?

Going Deeper

- Psalm 131 God promises to tend to your going outs and your coming ins from this time forth and forevermore. How does this promise speak to your concerns about the last days of your life?