

# Research on the Intervention of Medical Social Work in End-of-life Care Services for Terminally Ill Cancer Patients: A Perspective Based on Chinese Family Culture

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## Abstract

With the advancement of society, there has been increasing attention on end-of-life care services for terminally ill cancer patients. These services play a crucial role in stabilizing society and fostering harmonious families. Developing end-of-life care services with Chinese characteristics is an essential area that requires in-depth investigation. As the cornerstone of traditional Chinese culture, family culture holds profound significance, permeating various aspects of Chinese society. Therefore, integrating and interacting the principles of social work with Chinese family culture is imperative for developing end-of-life care services that are tailored to the Chinese context. Based on a multi-case study of end-of-life care services, this research first explores the importance of Chinese family culture in end-of-life care services. It then provides a detailed analysis of the positive and negative effects of this culture on end-of-life care for terminally ill cancer patients. Finally, this study proposes specific pathways for medical social work intervention in end-of-life care services. These pathways are designed to mitigate the negative influences of family culture and harness its positive effects. This research aims to align end-of-life care services with indigenous Chinese family culture. It advocates for the localization of end-of-life care services across different provinces and regions in China. This will foster a unique model of end-of-life care services and promote the localized development and effectiveness of medical social work intervention in end-of-life care services.

## Keywords

Chinese Family Culture, Medical Social Work, End-of-Life Care Services, Terminally Ill Cancer Patients

## 1. Introduction

As society evolves and living standards improve, the issue of end-of-life care for terminally ill cancer patients has garnered increasing attention. The intervention of medical social work in end-of-life care services for cancer patients to enhance their quality of life has become a critical topic. Chinese family culture, as the foundation of traditional Chinese culture, represents an essential cultural factor that cannot be overlooked when exploring end-of-life care services with Chinese characteristics and constructing a localized model of end-of-life care services in China. Therefore, this study, based on practical experience in end-of-life care, examines the issue of the localization

of medical social work intervention in end-of-life care services for terminally ill cancer patients from the perspective of Chinese family culture.

### **1.1 Definition of Chinese Family Culture**

The term "family" in China first appeared during the Northern and Southern Dynasties, but the comprehensive system of marriage and family had already been established in the Zhou Dynasty. "Family" is a significant term in Chinese culture, representing an important support system. The Chinese family has been continuously constructed from the individual family to the extended family throughout its long history, gradually forming a distinctive family culture and the ideology of placing the family at the center of Chinese society [1]. As a result of the transmission and evolution of Chinese culture across generations, the concept of "family" in China not only refers to the physical household but also embodies a spiritual dimension, giving rise to the unique family culture in China. Family culture is a complex system comprising various institutions, behaviors, concepts, and mentalities centered around kinship, geographical relations, and blood relations. It encompasses the structure, values, and ethics of the family. It can be asserted that family culture constitutes the core of traditional Chinese culture, with Chinese culture essentially being the "culture of the family" [2].

### **1.2 Differences between Chinese and Western Family Cultures**

Western societies follow a two-tier structure of "individual-society," whereas Chinese society follows a three-tier structure of "individual-family-society" [3]. These differing societal structures profoundly influence the cognitive patterns and problem-solving approaches of individuals in both systems [4]. Western societies emphasize the development of individual personality and the fulfillment of personal experiences, whereas China emphasizes the integrity and harmony of the family, both internally and externally. Western societies focus on fostering independence in children and emphasizing equality between children and parents, while Chinese culture emphasizes filial piety and hierarchical relationships within the family, underscoring individual responsibilities. When encountering family challenges, Western societies encourage open criticism and actively seek external assistance, whereas Chinese society emphasizes keeping family issues private and places trust in internal family members. Hence, while end-of-life care in Western societies is based on fulfilling individual needs, in China, it is approached through the lens of the family, analyzing and addressing issues through the lens of familial relationships. Therefore, in the practical implementation of end-of-life care services in China, the deep-rooted cultural sentiments of family culture should be fully considered.

## **2. Exploring the Practice of End-of-Life Care Services from the Perspective of Chinese Family Culture**

End-of-life care for terminally ill cancer patients, in cases where no cure is possible and death is imminent, aims to provide patients and their families with "comprehensive care," encompassing holistic, familial, team-based, continuous, and community-wide support. This approach satisfies the various needs of the patients' life journey, thereby enhancing their quality of life and dignity. The ultimate goal of end-of-life care services is to ensure a peaceful end for the patient and a compassionate continuation for the family [5]. Drawing from extensive practical experience in end-of-life care at Ningyao Hospital, this study, through multiple real-life cases, explores the positive and negative impacts of family culture on the intervention of medical social work in end-of-life care services, proposing specific approaches for medical social workers to navigate these influences.

### **2.1 Positive Impacts of Chinese Family Culture on the Intervention of Medical Social Work in End-of-Life Care Services**

Several cases in practical settings demonstrate that Chinese family culture plays a significant facilitating role in the intervention of medical social work in end-of-life care services for terminally ill cancer patients, influencing various aspects positively.

#### **2.1.1 Assistance from the Informal Family Support System**

The formal support system provides substantial emotional and practical assistance when individuals face difficulties, significantly benefiting terminally ill cancer patients. Family members and relatives provide tolerance and understanding to the patients, and their emotional support and solace help them navigate this critical period. The

support and solace from relatives are irreplaceable, as they not only strengthen the patients' emotional beliefs but also help them cope with the fear of death, guilt over their behavior, and other emotional burdens [6]. Importantly, under the influence of Chinese family culture, the informal family support system provides a favorable opportunity to meet the spiritual needs of cancer patients.

### **2.1.2 Facilitation through the Establishment of Quasi-Familial Roles**

In the hierarchical Chinese societal structure, the role of medical social workers in serving terminally ill cancer patients necessitates a transformation of their identity and role into being seen as "insiders" to better facilitate end-of-life care services. This transformation involves finding relevance and establishing quasi-familial relationships with the patients, their families, and their relatives, enabling medical social workers to integrate themselves into the family and the family culture. This behavior enables medical social workers to establish more stable professional relationships with the patients and their families, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of their services and creating favorable conditions for their intervention.

### **2.1.3 Support from a Healthy Family Environment**

The family environment significantly influences individuals. The mentality of terminally ill cancer patients is not only related to their psychological coping mechanisms but is also profoundly influenced by the family environment and relationships. Harmonious and healthy family relationships, characterized by effective communication, mutual understanding and acceptance, trust, and appreciation, provide support, encourage joint decision-making, and strive for the well-being of the family, while also accepting external assistance when necessary. A positive interaction pattern and communication mode between patients and their families can create a healthy family atmosphere, offering support to the patients within a harmonious and healthy family relationship, thereby facilitating a positive emotional expression, sharing inner feelings, and accepting medical social workers.

## **2.2 Negative Impacts of Chinese Family Culture on the Intervention of Medical Social Work in End-of-Life Care Services**

While family culture facilitates the intervention of medical social work in end-of-life care services for terminally ill cancer patients, it also exerts certain negative influences.

### **2.2.1 Constraints Imposed by Filial Piety in Family Ethics**

Filial piety, as a core concept in Chinese family ethics, represents a traditional virtue of the Chinese nation and a vital ideological aspect of family culture. Filial piety emphasizes not only children's respect for the elderly but also their duty to support them. Influenced by the Chinese culture of filial piety, many patients' family members, despite their own physical and emotional exhaustion, still find it difficult to accept "outsiders" providing care and services to the patients, being unwilling to "give up" on the patients' medical treatment. In cases of terminally ill cancer, there exist instances where children, driven by the imperative of filial piety, insist on medical treatment despite knowing its futility. This not only makes it challenging for patients to receive comprehensive care but also exacerbates the various pressures on family members, rendering the provided care inadequate for the patients' needs while overburdening the family members themselves.

### **2.2.2 Influence of Family-Centric Consciousness**

Chinese society is centered around the family, with family culture emphasizing the unity and functionality of the family and emphasizing the responsibility and contribution of the individual within the family. When individuals fail to fulfill their role within the family and instead become a burden or obstacle to other members, they may develop a strong sense of self-blame and psychological burden. Terminally ill cancer patients often experience deep self-blame and guilt due to their perception of being a burden to the family instead of making contributions, driven by the ethos of family culture. Many patients believe that they are imposing on their families, leading to profound feelings of self-reproach, and they are reluctant to burden others. In cases where the patient is male, the traditional Chinese cultural notion of "men work outside, women manage the household" further complicates the patient's acceptance of their situation.

### **2.2.3 Constraints of the Trust Structure in Chinese Society**

A sound professional relationship is predicated on trust, and establishing trust is the foundation of relationship building [7]. Chinese society has its unique trust structure, emphasizing trust based on family and blood relations, where the level of intimacy determines the degree of trust. Moreover, traditional family culture adheres to the

concept of "keeping family problems within the family" and "sweeping one's doorstep clean," fostering a mentality and behavior of negative self-reliance. When individuals outside the family offer supportive services to the patients, the patients and their families tend to be skeptical or even resistant, considering such matters as internal affairs and even comparing cancer to a "shameful matter."

### **3. End-of-Life Care Services in Medical Social Work Based on the Perspective of Chinese Family Culture**

Based on the analysis and research of multiple cases mentioned earlier, it is evident that family culture plays a crucial role in the intervention of medical social work in end-of-life care services for cancer patients. To effectively carry out end-of-life care services in line with the national conditions in China, medical social workers should not only grasp professional social work knowledge and skills but also understand and learn about family culture. This understanding should serve as the basis for approaching end-of-life care services from the perspective of Chinese family culture.

#### **3.1 Widely Promoting and Publicizing End-of-Life Care Services**

The constraints of traditional family-held views on death and ethical filial piety often lead people to avoid discussing topics related to death and reject end-of-life care services. Due to the lack of understanding and trust in institutions and medical social workers, most families are reluctant to allow patients to receive such services. It is the responsibility of medical social workers to promote public awareness of end-of-life care services and medical social work, ensuring that the public has a comprehensive understanding of cancer knowledge and the concept of "a good death," thus being able to face death calmly.

#### **3.2 Effectively Exploiting Common Connections in Service Families**

Given the unique trust structure and hierarchical pattern in Chinese families, medical social workers should transform their own identity and role into being seen as part of the patient's family to smoothly carry out end-of-life care for terminally ill cancer patients. This involves finding connections with the patients and their families, labeling oneself about the patient and their family, bridging the gap, and creating a stable and high-quality foundation for the provision of end-of-life care services.

#### **3.3 Actively Assisting in Improving the Family Health System**

End-of-life care not only serves the individual but also the patient's family, contributing to the restoration of the family function. This is because the family system and family relationships significantly influence various aspects of an individual's psychological and physiological well-being. Establishing mutual support and fostering a healthy communication relationship among family members can effectively alleviate the fear of death and complex psychological changes in the initial stages for the patient, providing a constructive means to address the emotional conflicts arising from the patient's emotional fluctuations. However, in Chinese family culture, it is customary for family members to conceal their emotions internally. Therefore, medical social workers should actively assist patients and their families in timely communication, encouraging emotional expression within the family, and allowing the patients to feel understood, supported, cared for, and loved.

#### **3.4 Developing Service Plans Tailored to Different Family Cultures**

Over thousands of years, the inherited family culture has resulted in each family developing its unique cultural characteristics, influencing the perceptions, thoughts, and behaviors of each family. When intervening in end-of-life care services for terminally ill cancer patients, medical social workers should first understand and assess the patient's family culture, considering the potential differing factors such as the patient's experiences, circumstances, level of education, family structure, and life experiences. Additionally, different stages in the family life cycle exhibit varying family cultures and needs. After gathering information from the patients and their relatives, medical social workers should formulate targeted service plans. Tailoring intervention services to different individuals can enhance the quality and effectiveness of the services.

To improve the quality of end-of-life care services and achieve a truly localized intervention of medical social work in end-of-life care for terminally ill cancer patients, it is crucial to interact and integrate with Chinese local family culture, creating a system that suits the national conditions. Therefore, from the perspective of family culture,

it is necessary to mitigate its negative impacts and leverage its positive influences, implementing localized services according to the actual conditions of each province and region, promoting the development of end-of-life care services, and establishing a unique Chinese model for end-of-life care services.

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