

Forgiveness and Reconciliation Processes in Dying Patients With Cancer

Monika Renz, Daniel Büche, O Reichmuth, M Schuett Mao, U Renz, R Siebenrock & Florian Strasser

This article studies forgiveness and reconciliation (F/R) in patients with cancer. It focuses on the end of life, when family conflicts resurface and unfinished business challenges patients and causes spiritual distress. Forgiveness and reconciliation may intensify patient-family relationships and facilitate peace of mind and peaceful death. Existing forgiveness models and interventions focus on coping in life, yet no study has examined F/R processes until death. Our mixed-method exploratory study hypothesized that F/R processes occur in phases, repeatedly, and are spurred by approaching death. Three interdisciplinary units at a major Swiss hospital observed 50 dying patients with cancer experiencing severe conflicts with relatives, themselves, and/or with fate/God. Participant observation was combined with interpretative phenomenological analysis and descriptive statistical analysis. A semi-structured observation protocol was developed based on a 5-phase model. The protocol included space for notes (emotions, interventions, effects on dying processes). It was assessed by 20 professionals for 1 year. Analysis was supported by international interdisciplinary experts. We found that conflicts were complex and involved relational, biographical, and spiritual layers. In 62% of patients, F/R processes occurred repeatedly. Many patients died after finding F/R (22 within 48 hours). Patients indicated that imminent death, a mediating third party, acceptance, and experiences of hope motivated them to seek F/R. Although deep relationships may support F/R processes, our limited data on near-death experience/spiritual experiences restrict interpretation. Forgiveness and reconciliation processes oscillate between 5 phases: denial, crisis, experience of hope, decision, and finding F/R. Understanding F/R processes, empathy, hope, and a neutral third party may support patients in seeking forgiveness.

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