Dying as an Opportunity for Positive Growth
A Qualitative Study of Hospice Patients’ Wisdom

Presentation by:

Jennifer Breier, MS Ed., MS CRC
The Center for Hospice and Palliative Care
Cheektowaga, NY 14215

Scott Wright, MS,
Counseling Psychology Trainee
University of Albany, State University of New York
“A tremendous opportunity for growth comes out of being sick, and growth often comes from things we don’t want to deal with.”

- Study Participant
Why Study Wisdom?

- Those facing death often struggle with psychological concerns, including loss of autonomy, isolation, and loss of meaning in life (Chochinov et al., 2009)

- Wisdom is associated with better health and life satisfaction among the elderly (Ardelt, 2000) and has received increased scholarly attention in recent years (Bangen, Meeks, & Jeste, 2013)
Despite years of research on wisdom, a unitary definition of wisdom has not emerged (Staudinger & Gluck, 2011).
Conceptual Model of Wisdom

- Social decision-making and pragmatic knowledge of life
- Prosocial attitudes and behaviors
- Reflection and self-understanding
- Acknowledgement of and coping effectively with uncertainty
- Emotional homeostasis

(Bangen, et al., 2013)
Positive Psychology suggests that experiencing and overcoming suffering may facilitate positive psychological changes (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004)

Confronting aging, illness, and death may present an opportunity for growth and developing wisdom (Wong & Tomer, 2011; Choi & Landeros, 2011; Kinnier, Tribbensee, Rose & Vaughan, 2001)
Purpose of the Study

• This qualitative study explored terminally ill hospice patients’ perspectives on wisdom, meaning, life, and death in the context of their own confrontations with mortality.
Participants

- 15 terminally ill patients enrolled in Hospice homecare program
- Nominated as being particularly wise by Hospice clinicians

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AGE</th>
<th>SEX</th>
<th>RACE</th>
<th>PRIMARY DX</th>
<th>EDUCATION</th>
<th>RELIGIOUS/SPIRITUAL BELIEFS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M=74.47 (SD=15.86)</td>
<td>11 female, 4 male</td>
<td>14 white, 1 black</td>
<td>Various cancers (n=9), CHF (n=4), ALS, (n=1), pulmonary fibrosis (n=1)</td>
<td>High school only (n=10), college or higher (n=5)</td>
<td>Christian (various, n=10), not religious/not specified (n=3), Buddhist (n=1), Native American spirituality (n=1)</td>
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Procedure and Analysis

Sample interview questions:

- From your perspective now, what do you think matters most in life?
- What, if anything, once seemed important to you but no longer seems so important?
- What is the meaning of life (or your life)?
- How, if at all, has your illness changed your sense of meaning in life?
- What, if anything, have you learned about life from your experience of illness?
- What is wisdom?

Semi-structured interviews were transcribed and analyzed using the consensual qualitative research (CQR) method (Hill, 2012)
Wisdom as defined by patients

- Humility (Typical)
- Intellect and Rationality (Variant)
- Sharing Knowledge with Others (Variant)
- Listening to/Learning from Others (Variant)
- Spirituality (Variant)
- Acceptance (Variant)
- Self-Knowledge (Variant)
- Learning from Experience (Variant)

Key to Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) Results:
- "General" - Theme occurred in most or all cases (14-15 cases)
- "Typical" - Theme occurred in more than half of cases (8+ cases)
- "Variant" - Theme occurred in fewer than half of cases (2-7 cases)
Humility (Typical)

“Wisdom is when we realize 'I don't really know much’”

“[Wisdom is] looking for the real answers. People say ‘well I finally got that figured out.’ No you didn’t. They think they did. You finally satisfied yourself to think that.”

“I think we should be humble. Because you know when you think you’re doing really good and you’re patting yourself on the back, that’s probably not when you’re at your best [...] So I guess wisdom is reaching out because it’s important to look in but it’s also important to look out and learn things from other people. [...] And some people actually made the effort to teach me those things just out of the kindness of their heart. Because when I was younger, I used to know everything.”

“That is wisdom there. It is okay to say ‘I don’t know.’ A lot of people think they have to have the answer. In my case I say that lots of times: ‘I don’t know.’”

“Humility is probably one of the hardest things it is for a human being to do, for a human being to do is being humble. Humbling ourselves to one another and the situations around us constantly every day. [...] and with humility comes wisdom. I think they go hand in hand together. I don’t think you can have one without the other.”
The only true wisdom is in knowing you know nothing.

Socrates
What Makes Life Meaningful?
(According to Participants)

- Relationships (General)
- Growth of Self (General)
- Spirituality & Religion (Typical)
- Career & Vocation (Typical)
- Living a Full Life (Typical)
# Challenges and Methods of Coping

## Challenges at the End of Life

- Physical Challenges (Typical)
- Legacy Concerns (Typical)
- Family Challenges (Typical)
- Inability to do important things (Typical)
- Variant findings: Fear and uncertainty, aftermath concerns, loss of autonomy, dying with dignity, isolation, difficulty accepting death, learning to accept help

## Coping with Illness and Dying

- Developing an accepting attitude (Typical)
- Receiving support from others (Typical)
- Religious/spiritual comfort (Typical)
- Variant findings: finding meaning in illness, sense of humor
Dying as an opportunity for positive growth (Typical)

- Enhanced appreciation of life in the present moment (Typical)
- Change in priorities (Typical)
- Leads to self-improvement (Variant)
- Greater sense of purpose (Variant)
- Strengthened relationships (Variant)
- Provided opportunity to reflect (Variant)
- Fosters wisdom (Variant)
Illness and Dying as an Opportunity for Positive Growth

“It gave me time to think.”

“…the illness, it has given me a sense that I have taken so much for granted.”

“[Illness] definitely makes you wiser, smarter if you let it.”

“Then I got cancer and then it opens up your eyes to the possibilities of life can be cut short and I don’t think people get that perspective very often… I treat it so much better as a beautiful journey and gift and you don’t take it lightly.”

“I want to live until I die. I don’t want to die until I die.”

“It has made me stronger. It has made me capable of things I never thought I was capable of. A lot of treatments. A lot of pulling until you think you can’t be pulled anymore and then you find more strength and you move forward more which I think has taught me so much about myself.”

“Death doesn’t have to be a bad thing. It can be a thing where you just look at it and accept it for what it is.”

“[my relationship with my husband] has gotten so much stronger… getting sick and going through what we’ve gone through together just heightened that even more.”
Advice

For People Facing Death
- Develop a positive attitude (Variant)
- Strive for Acceptance (Variant)
- Resolve unfinished business (Variant)
- Seek Support (Variant)
- Be Open (Variant)

For Caregivers of the Dying
- Provide compassion and kindness (Typical)
- It is important to take care of yourself, too (Variant)
- Listen to the dying person (Variant)

For Everyone
- Be open-minded (Variant)
- Pursue happiness and fulfillment (Variant)
- Be considerate and helpful (Variant)
- Seek out the positive and live in the moment (Variant)
- Reflect on and learn from experiences (Variant)
A wise old owl sat on an oak
The more he saw the less he spoke
The less he spoke the more he heard
Why aren't we like that wise old bird?

Charles M Schulz

Wisdom Quotes
Conclusions

- Despite challenges faced by participants, the dying process was generally viewed as a major opportunity for positive growth.
  - This finding contrasts society’s marginalization of the elderly and dying.

- Participants’ beliefs about wisdom were consistent with major theoretical models of wisdom, including the five features described by Bangen et al. (2013).
Conclusions Continued

- Participants typically endorsed Socratic Humility (knowing that you don’t know) as a key feature of wisdom.

- Many psychological challenges associated with facing death were described, consistent with studies that suggest care of the dying should encompass psychological treatments in addition to physical treatments (Chochinov, et al., 2009).

- Participants’ descriptions of how they cope with illness and facing death, and the sources of meaning in their lives may be relevant to helping others who are struggling at the end of life.
Final Conclusions and Recommendations for Future Research

- The sources of meaning in life participants described echo the findings of other CQR studies focused on meaning in life (Hill et al., 2013; Wright et al, 2014), and emphasize the value of connecting with others and continuing to learn and grow at the end of life.

- Further scientific and clinical attention to the positive elements of death and dying may prove beneficial in fostering well-being and vitality among the aging and dying.
Questions?

Thank you for attending this presentation!
We are thankful to the participants who donated their precious time and words of wisdom.

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References


