

Clinical supervision can benefit palliative care

“ Understanding the psychological consequences of serious illness, including how they affect not only the sufferer and family members but also the professionals who provide care and treatment, is of critical importance to the safety and quality of healthcare provision.

Clinical supervision has a role to play in helping all healthcare professionals carry out their roles. It can be structured to provide a judicious resource for healthcare professionals working alongside people with cancer and other serious illnesses. Issues related to giving a legitimate voice to suffering can be addressed straightforwardly and with sensitivity to individual needs, culture and gender. Work discussions concerning clinical practice can encompass problems of living and, perhaps controversially, preparation for dying.

While clinical supervision is not a therapeutic relationship, it does offer opportunities for healthcare professionals to become more aware of themselves as well as of aspects of their practice. This, in turn, can help them to manage their work-life balance more efficiently. However, clinical supervision can also challenge them. Supervised professional practice can be characterised by anxiety. Supervisees typically report uncertainty about feeling judged, and they may be uncomfortable about having to consider aspects of professional practice.

In a group format, they often worry about appearing inadequate in areas of professional practice and fear that they may be assessed negatively by colleagues. They may also be concerned about whether the supervisor will respect their approach to professional practice.

Will the supervisor find faults? Can they trust the supervisor with sensitive accounts of professional practice? All these concerns can be addressed through clinical supervision by permitting a more robust and evaluative approach to self-management. Showing respect for oneself and others, as well as fostering trust and empathy, are learnable competencies. All can be actively developed through working together in clinical supervision. Each factor is also critical to avoiding burnout and ill health.

Burnout is a physical and psychological state, often characterised by emotional lethargy, tiredness and reduced motivation. It typically affects the most conscientious healthcare professionals. It can have a negative effect on their attitudes to patients and families as well as to other professionals, resulting in failures in empathy, reduced caring and overall feelings of disaffection with work and life. For this reason, counterbalances to work-related stress are required. Support, along with diversity in work and life and a sense of accomplishment, are important to the delivery of safe, effective healthcare. As healthcare professionals, we need to discern what we can realistically achieve when providing care for others.

Of course, all these requirements cannot be provided through clinical supervision alone; yet every one of them will influence work-life balance. Work cultures that promote open approaches to difference through clear and supportive structures are likely to prove beneficial to health professionals and service users alike. Similarly, policies that make sense to those who are responsible for implementing them, coupled with clear professional pathways, will provide a way forward for healthy and effective teamwork.

Clinical supervision can offer opportunities to recognise when balance is required between work and life, and also help to harness the excellent service carried out by many healthcare professionals and health service organisations. Safe and effective delivery of care is inextricably linked to the personal wellbeing of palliative care health professionals.

Through clinical supervision, potential exists for organised, supportive and composed healthcare delivery. Knowledge derived from supervised professional practice can additionally inform healthcare provision for the benefit of individual professionals and palliative care teams, and so for the wider community overall.

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