

EPIDEMIOLOGICAL RESEARCH IN PALLIATIVE CARE, WHY DOES IT MATTER?

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Epidemiology is the study of the distribution and determinants of disease frequency. Therefore, epidemiological information is used to plan and evaluate strategies to prevent illness and as a guide to the management of patients in whom disease has already developed. Epidemiological information can be used to better understand how common a disease occurs, a symptom occurs, or a problem occurs within groups of patients. This is helpful in better understanding the relevance of each disease, symptom or problem, in studying its causal relationships, and in developing and testing strategies to improve the management of the disease, symptom or problem.

For example, epidemiological research into breathlessness can

- ◆ describe the frequency and severity of breathlessness at different stages of disease, or in different groups of patients
- ◆ categorise different types of breathlessness
- ◆ describe the different factors associated with increased breathlessness
- ◆ develop predictive indicators of those people most likely to experience breathlessness
- ◆ compare the outcomes of different treatments

Epidemiology is, therefore, concerned with measuring frequency (by measuring incidence and prevalence) and by defining the time, place and type of person who is affected by the problem. Epidemiological methods use both experimental and non-experimental study designs. This presentation will examine the use of non-experimental studies and how their results have been useful in palliative care. The rigour of an epidemiological approach means that great emphasis is placed upon accurate recording and measurement, in particular over time. Its results can aid clinical practice by providing better information about problems and for health care planning in determining the number of people likely to be in need of care.