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Tony Ryan, Clare Gardiner, Gary Bellamy, Merryn Gott and Christine Ingleton

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Barriers and facilitators to the receipt of palliative care for people with dementia: The views of medical and nursing staff

Tony Ryan  School of Nursing & Midwifery, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK
Claire Gardiner  School of Nursing & Midwifery, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK
Gary Bellamy  School of Nursing, The University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand
Merryn Gott  School of Nursing, The University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand
Christine Ingleton  School of Nursing, The University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand

Abstract
Background: The global prevalence of dementia is set to rise to almost 65 million people by 2030, providing policy makers and practitioners with significant challenges, not least within the realms of end-of-life care. The international literature would suggest that people with dementia may benefit from palliative forms of care, but evidence indicates that many fail to access such provision at the end of life. The role of the health care team is pivotal if people with dementia are to benefit from the transition to palliative care.
Aim: This paper reports on qualitative research conducted in the UK that sought to explore the experiences of health care practitioners working in palliative care and sought to establish the issues relating to end-of-life care for people with dementia.
Design: Eight focus groups and four individual interviews were held. Data were analysed using a thematic approach.
Setting/participants: The study included palliative care practitioners (n=58) including medical, nursing and allied health professionals. Participants were recruited from acute hospitals, general practice, hospices and specialist palliative care units in the UK.
Results: Four themes were identified: Making the transition; Competence challenged; ‘The long view’ and Working together. Whilst there exists good practice in this area, the barriers to timely and appropriate transitions to palliative care for people with dementia and their families continue to exist. The paper concludes with recommendations for policy and practice development.

Keywords
Alzheimer’s disease, dementia, health care team, mental competency, palliative care, qualitative research

Introduction
It is estimated that the global prevalence of dementia is almost 36 million people. With numbers expected to double every 20 years, resulting in a predicted prevalence of 65 million people with the disease by 2030, the challenges facing policymakers, practitioners and researchers over the coming decades are clear.1,2 Governments in the developed world have sought to address this growing challenge through the delivery of policies that seek to raise awareness, expedite diagnosis, improve support for family carers and enhance workforce competence within a context of supportive care from diagnosis to death.3,4 The evidence would, however, suggest that many nation states have a long way to go in providing high-quality end-of-life or palliative care to people with dementia. A recent survey of European countries highlighted that most people with the disease die in institutional forms of care with little support provided in the community.7 Others suggest that people with dementia in Europe do not gain access to palliative or supportive care,8 contrary to the evidence of the efficacy of such an approach for people with dementia.9 If positive transitions to palliative approaches are likely to occur, clarity about when the end of life is near is required.10 In the case of the person with dementia, there remains uncertainty about this. End-of-life experiences for people with dementia are described as lengthy and typified by slow degeneration and decline, unlike the typical cancer trajectory, and death is often precipitated by other acute health events, such as pneumonia or fractured neck of femur.11 Several authors have attempted to identify key indicators of imminent death, noting the significance of weight loss, motor disability and deterioration...
in physical health.\textsuperscript{12–14} It has been argued that failure to recognize timely transitions to palliative care can result in prolonged exposure to aggressive forms of treatment. Paradoxically, it is claimed that throughout their illness people with dementia often receive ‘too little’ care, whereas end-of-life care is often characterized by ‘too much’.\textsuperscript{15} Evidence indicates that interventions such as feeding tubes and systemic antibiotics are used as a result of ‘custom and practice’ amongst clinical teams rather than formal guidance\textsuperscript{16} and that such practice persists despite the ambiguity surrounding effectiveness.\textsuperscript{17–19}

A growing international literature suggests that palliative approaches at the end of life for people with dementia are effective. Several reviews point unequivocally to the importance of adopting palliative approaches in non-malignant diseases, such as dementia, particularly in acute settings.\textsuperscript{20–22} Many patients, regardless of their condition, stand to benefit from a change in approach to care from curative (with a focus on disease management) to palliative (with a focus on maximizing quality of remaining life).\textsuperscript{23} Data does, however, suggest that clinical teams are often reluctant to enable the transition to take place and that tensions arising from differing views about extending life may exist between family members of people with dementia and physicians.\textsuperscript{24–26} The role played by clinical teams in promoting and facilitating appropriate transitions to palliative care for people with dementia is pivotal. This paper reports on focus groups and individual interviews undertaken with health care practitioners in the UK. The research was an important part of a wider study looking at transitions to palliative care for older people in acute hospital settings\textsuperscript{27} with the specific aim of exploring the experiences of health care practitioners working in palliative care in order to establish the issues relating to end-of-life care for people with dementia. Data were gathered within the focus groups and interviews to address the issues of cognitive impairment as a factor in such transitions.

**Method**

Given the innovative nature of the enquiry and the limited existing evidence base, a qualitative study design was adopted. Focus groups were held in two UK cities: one with an ethnically and economically diverse population of around 550,000; the other a smaller, more homogeneous city of around 85,000 people. Senior medical staff and nurses assisted in the identification of hospital based participants. General practitioner (GP) and community participants were identified and approached via primary care research networks. Groups were comprised of participants from a range of disciplinary backgrounds (see Table 1), purposively sampled in order to achieve the maximum variation of experience and opinion. The focus group and interview guide were developed following a review of the international literature and relevant policy and addressed the key aims of the study. Specifically, three key questions were addressed. (1) Does a patient’s diagnosis influence end-of-life care? (2) Are there any specific issues relating to people with dementia and the end-of-life care they receive? (3) Is it more difficult to achieve palliative care for people with dementia? The focus groups and individual interviews lasted for approximately 40 minutes. The study received ethical approval from a UK National Health Service (NHS) Research Ethics Committee and study methods and practices were consistent with UK NHS ethical guidance. All participants gave written informed consent. None of those approached to take part in the study refused to take part.

**Analysis**

Focus group and interview transcripts were recorded and transcribed verbatim. To address issues of rigour and trustworthiness, transcripts were read by three of the authors (CG, CI, TR) and core themes were identified. NViVO 8 computer software was used to facilitate analysis. A coding framework was developed by consensus and was grounded in the data rather than decided a priori. Subthemes were then identified. The themes and subthemes discussed in this article were then further analysed by TR. Direct quotations have been selected to illustrate the issues raised by participants and they are indicative both of typical responses and of the diversity of views obtained.

**Results**

Four themes were identified as a result of this analysis: Making the transition; Competence challenged; ‘The long view’ and Working together.

**Making the transition**

An important theme identified within these data related to the likelihood that people with dementia make a transition

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**Table 1. Breakdown of participants by profession and setting.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Job title</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Consultant</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior doctor</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General practitioner</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice nurse</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clinical nurse specialist</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other nurse</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allied health professional</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place of work</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acute hospital</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General practice</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospice</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialist palliative care unit</td>
<td>5</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
to palliative care at an appropriate point in the care pathway. The theme addresses those factors identified by health care practitioners that hinder or facilitate appropriate transitions. The data suggests that there remain considerable difficulties in the achievement of good-quality end-of-life care in the form of palliative services for people with dementia. There are two notable subthemes: candidature and rising tide and resources.

The notion of candidature refers to the ways in which people with dementia were seen, or not seen, by health care practitioners to be the potential recipients of palliative care provision. To some participants in the study, the idea that dementia constituted a condition that might on its own be a cause of death was questionable. A failure to acknowledge this provided a barrier to services of a palliative nature. Below, the notion that dementia is a cause of death is questioned by health care professionals, and participants report how it is often viewed as a normal pathological aspect of ageing, rather than a specific disorder in its own right.

Dementia isn’t a disease it’s just something that happens to people. (Specialist Palliative Care Team Focus Group (FG))

Dementia is not terminal. (GP Practice FG)

I think people with dementia are not considered often in the same league as somebody with heart failure, COPD or cancer. That is what happens to elderly people isn’t it? They get confused. (GP Practice FG)

The final extract suggests that other ‘conditions’ are considered worthy of specialist palliative care whilst dementia is not. Considerable discussion relating to criteria for referral to specialist palliative services was evident and, in particular, the idea that conditions other than dementia might warrant such care. These data would suggest that some professionals continue to fail to recognize the legitimacy of non-malignant diseases when it comes to the provision of palliative care. Participants in this study reflected upon their own experiences of how services inhibit the transition to palliative care for older people, particularly those who have dementia. This is exemplified in the quotes given below.

Elderly people with dementia don’t really get the care. They don’t get the active palliative care, you know what I’m talking about, active treatments, active palliative care. (GP Practice FG)

And it’s always been … again there’s been this idea that it’s almost like a culture that demented elderly patients belong in, and I hate to use the term, but geriatric units.

That’s where they go, they don’t come to hospices or anywhere for palliative care even though they’re just as deserving as anyone else. (Hospice FG)

The notion that ‘cancer is the key’ (Specialist Palliative Care Team FG) to accessing services was noted by participants. In addition, questions about the resources available to teams to enable them to provide palliative care to a wider population (including people with dementia) were raised. The ideas expressed below, by members of a specialist palliative care team in the community, suggest that existing pressures and already stretched capacity to deliver to its current client group has created tensions in being able to deliver to people with dementia.

We just couldn’t do that [provide palliative care to people with dementia]. We don’t have the resources but people with dementia are just allowed to die in nursing home or rest home beds. (GP Practice FG)

[increasing dementia referrals] But is that just reducing the palliative care service available to perhaps other people, I don’t know? (Hospice FG)

I would think in terms of beds, we’re struggling as it is for palliative cancer care, if they take that [dementia] in it’s going to be absolutely chaotic. (GP Practice FG)

Discussion about a ‘rising tide’ scenario prompted alternative proposals about the function, nature and possible model of palliative care for people with dementia. Participants articulated a reluctance to offer people with dementia as candidates for specialist palliative care because their difficulties may not be the same as cancer patients, particularly in the realm of pain management. This amounted to a very different approach to palliation in dementia, relying upon basic nursing skills and activities such as mouth care, pressure care and maintenance of dignity, which it was felt could be provided adequately by non-specialist teams:

Good symptom management, good emotional support, good support for the family, psychological and spiritual, social support, should be part and parcel of what everybody does and it should be offered to absolutely everybody I think. (Acute Hospital FG)

Competence challenged

Participants described a range of experiences and pointed to observations from clinical practice about limited competence, skills and capability in working with people with dementia. This notion of challenged competence was apparent in relation to the assessment and management of care of people with dementia, particularly in advanced states. Assessment practices were identified as problematic by participants, reflecting the difficulties in working with a group of people who find it difficult to communicate their needs. There was recognition by participants that current skills and competences within health care teams were not sufficient to meet the demands of assessment and challenging behaviour. For example, in assessing symptoms amongst people with dementia, a broader range of ‘different
indicators and different signs’ (Hospice FG) need to be considered and clinicians reported that they did not always feel confident in doing this. As exemplified below, many health care professionals in this study felt under-confident about assessing the needs of people with dementia, with pain assessment considered especially challenging:

I think as well it’s sometimes the assessment with people with dementia or cognitive impairment needs to be very specific, very specialised, you need people that approach it in perhaps different ways and I’m not sure that we’re great at that in palliative care. (Hospice FG)

How do you assess their pain if they’ve got very advanced dementia? It’s difficult to know how much pain they’re in. (Consultant Geriatrician, Individual Interview)

Similar difficulties were expressed in terms of the care management of people with dementia who might have palliative care needs. Typically, behavioural challenges were identified by teams who reported finding it difficult to accomplish high-quality care for those people with dementia experiencing confusion. The respondent below describes the perceived need to recourse to pharmaceutical, rather than behavioural, interventions in an uncertain context:

The ones I’ve had have been quite aggressive towards the end of their life so it’s quite difficult because you end up giving them lots of chemicals that you’re not sure is a good idea or not, but they’re so upset. (GP Practice FG)

The perception that people with dementia might display aggression was noted by other participants. Furthermore, this was viewed as a factor that might provide significant challenges to teams and inhibit the likelihood that people with dementia might make the transition to a palliative care approach. As with practices associated with assessment, the uncertainty expressed by participants about how to work effectively with confused patients questions the capability of some teams to be able to provide high-quality palliative care for people with dementia. Additional training was identified as a strategy to overcome these difficulties, particularly given the view that people with dementia had the right to receive palliative services.

‘The long view’

Enhancing decision making for those whose capacity to communicate or consent to treatment is limited has been a central theme within the realm of end-of-life care for some time. Participants in this study advocated for greater emphasis being placed upon ‘planning ahead’ and developing relationships with key people over a long time period to assist in facilitating decision making around palliative care. This theme has been labelled ‘The long view’ in recognition of these data. Participants pointed to the need for engagement with the wider team and family members when palliative approaches are recognized as being appropriate. For example, this participant recognized that very difficult decisions need to be made in the context of trusting relationships between a group of people.

I think for patients with Alzheimer’s where to exactly draw a line between say particularly… feeding aspects or no feeding, those areas are very, very difficult. I think when they reach that stage where palliation is required I think there needs to be extensive dialogue between the various professionals and the carers and the family. (Consultant Geriatrician- Individual Interview)

This approach is consistent with the sentiment inherent within the UK Mental Capacity Act (UK MCA)28 and a best-interest approach to decision making. A best-interest approach was identified by participants as both a logical and a practical response in the context of decision making for people with cognitive and communicative difficulties and the impact of the UK MCA was noted by participants. For some, the Act had merely formalized already existing ‘best-interest’ practices. This was the case within a specialized palliative care team context, where collaborative practices have been well established:

I agree that in palliative care we’ve always had, or in most, we’ve always had that best practice approach involving … not making unilateral decisions, involving family, involving patients. I think what the Mental Capacity Act certainly in palliative care has done is put things more legally and also it’s just given a little bit more structure to it so that people are more aware and doing it in a structured way. (Registrar, Individual Interview)

Another participant, who also had a specialist palliative care background, suggested that the UK MCA confirmed existing practices for people who might lack capacity:

Largely it hasn’t changed the way we manage palliative care. In a way I think we clearly go by clinical, social and psychological aspects rather than just a piece of paper in front of you – the mental capacity act. (Hospice Focus Group)

Furthermore, participants pointed to the UK MCA as prompting the kind of capacity assessment and partnership work necessary for good decision making, stating that they felt it had made a ‘big change’ (Hospice FG) to practice. This transformation was not limited to the practice of teams, but also to the ways in which they now perceived people with dementia as active participants within the decision-making process. The UK MCA in this context had ‘made people think’ and this, according to some participants, had helped professionals to re-evaluate the role that people with dementia might play in the decision-making process.
I think often people were just written off and just put in a home whereas now at least we’re thinking ok they’ve got dementia but can they make a decision for themselves? (Acute Hospital FG)

The changes prompted by the UK MCA in this context suggest positive repercussions for patients and families. In the first case below a member of a specialist palliative team stresses the importance of using the knowledge of those who have known the person with dementia for a long period of time in order to make decisions about their care.

I think one of the great, one of the greatest or more useful tools in looking after people with dementia is actually having a long view, and actually when you’re inviting specialist services in who get a snapshot it’s actually very difficult to base really complex treatments on a snapshot without that long view component. So you rely on a GP, a family member, a district nurse, a carer who has the long view to help you and say that this isn’t how they are if you see what I mean, as a guide, and if you don’t have that or the person who you expect to provide you with the long view can’t give you that consistent opinion then it makes assessment more challenging. (Hospice FG)

In the excerpt below a specialist palliative care team member recognizes that relationships between patient, family and health care professional are central to the decision-making process, but comments that, in her experience, these relationships are rarely capitalized upon within this context.

It’s having some sort of relationship, some sort of a background, a shared history with that patient so you can then say ‘look you’ve been coming to this clinic for however long and how do you think things are panning out for you?’ So again I don’t think it is something that we do and probably something that we should. (General Practice FG)

Others pointed to important work that can be undertaken between secondary, primary and nursing home care settings to plan for future palliative care needs, involving ‘liaising’ with other professionals, identifying ‘opportunities’ and going further to embed ‘systems’ to enable this to happen on a more comprehensive footing.

**Working together**

A significant theme that was identified related to how teams from a variety of settings, organizations and disciplinary backgrounds can collaborate in seeking to achieve high-quality palliative care. One team noted how their experiences led them to believe that sound collaborative working between professions and consulting other ‘specialists’ in the field of dementia care had helped to facilitate transitions to palliative care:

I’ve got three people on the caseload at the moment that I think really are dying and it’s purely as a result of dementia…. The doctors have wrestled quite a lot with that and they’re really experienced geriatricians we’ve got on our team and each of those cases we sought a second opinion from a psychiatrist but also from another geriatrician as well to say ‘what do you think?’. (Acute Hospital FG)

Participants suggested that the failure to gain access to ‘specialist’ dementia advice and guidance hindered transition for the patient. In such cases the compartmentalization of needs is apparent, with teams appearing to address only those patient problems that they felt were within their perceived remit. Without investment from other professionals, the following primary care-based team participant felt unable to make progress:

It’s difficult because we’re not mental health trained so although we see the dementia, the mental health part, we’re not trained as much as [mental health team] it’s very difficult getting their services in and working with them…. We don’t work together very well. (GP Practice FG)

Further discontinuity was highlighted by other participants, particularly in relation to Percutaneous Endoscopic Gastrostomy (PEG) feeding. The suggestion below is that clinical staff in hospital will do what they can in the short term to solve problems for people with dementia who are dying. There is, however, little consideration of how feeding can take place in the longer term in primary care, and there is limited collaboration with primary care services:

A typical example is dementia. They may have put in a peg and a lot of discussion around that peg is going to be done but if this person goes home or goes to a nursing home there’s absolutely no kind of supporting the other team about what should happen to this peg feeding if this person deteriorates. (Consultant Geriatrician, Individual Interview)

These data highlight very difficult issues in collaborative working and suggest that the quality of end-of-life care may be compromised as a result of ineffective working relationships.

**Discussion**

The need to provide palliative forms of care to those dying with non-malignant chronic diseases is well established. Evidence can also be found to suggest that national policies are being aimed at ensuring access to palliative care for all, including people with dementia. More recent pan-European recommendations aimed at promoting high-quality end-of-life care for people with dementia have also been made. Recommendations include the adoption of palliative care approaches for advanced dementia, respect of wishes in relation to place of care and involvement of family carers in decision making. More specifically Gove et al. recommend that health care professionals should be
provided with dementia care, communication and pain assessment training, demonstrating the pivotal role played by the health care team in enabling people with dementia to achieve high-quality palliative provision.

This study has provided some insight into the experiences, ideas and attitudes about approaches to palliative care provision for people with dementia, drawing on a number of clinical teams from two sites in England. Findings suggest that there are significant barriers to people with dementia making the transition to palliative care. This failure can, in part, be attributed to cultural (ideas, values and practices) and systemic aspects of the service infrastructure (organizational boundaries and funding). Clinicians, for instance, alluded to the notion that dementia is not recognized as a cause of death and that candidate for palliative services is therefore questioned. Mitchell et al. have demonstrated that practitioners hugely underestimate mortality rates of people with dementia. Poor knowledge amongst some teams is apparent here, but uncertainty about prognostication may account for some of these shortcomings. Indeed, Murray et al. suggest that the trajectory associated with dementia is protracted and complex, involving an ‘entry, re-entry’ scenario, resulting in poor acknowledgement of end-of-life status. Inadequacies of a systemic nature may also be as a result of the traditional role of hospices (as providers of palliative care to people with cancer) and reliance on cancer charities as a source of funding. Certainly there appear to be concerns about the resources available to provide palliative services to an ageing population, but little critical debate about how these challenges might be overcome using different models of provision. These data also point to limited confidence amongst some health care teams in the assessment and management of dementia at the end of life. The pain assessment of people with dementia has for some time been highlighted as problematic and has prompted a plethora of tools aimed at objective measurement. Limited exposure to such methods of assessment and their usage are a feature of these data. To some extent the same can be said of the perceived behavioural challenges sometimes demonstrated by people with dementia. It has long been noted that generalist teams often find difficulty in preventing and managing behaviours that manifest as a result of confusion, frustration and communication difficulties. These forms of behaviour have been viewed as a barrier to achieving transition to palliative care. These data suggest little knowledge of the causes of behaviour and how these might be prevented, suggesting that work in this area is important if progress is to be made. Hughes et al. have highlighted these deficiencies, whilst at the same time recommending the growth of specialist teams as a source of advice and practice development. It would appear here, however, that the development of such specialism contributes, to some extent, to the compartmentalization of skills and resources. Whilst it was noted by participants that collaborative practice is desirable, it was not always possible, and where specialist advice was sought it was not always forthcoming. Of particular importance is the collaboration that occurs in order to promote continuity. Ryan has suggested that the development of close working relationships between practitioners and families is fundamental if decision making is to be shared. This development of close working relationships between practitioners and the families of people with dementia at the end of life has also recently been echoed in a large-scale survey of palliative care Programme Directors in the United States. There are data here to suggest that a commitment to ‘The long view’ helps to promote good practice. The notion of long-term investment in planning and building trusting relationships is evocative of the advanced care planning movement and such a framework should be considered as a potential way forward in the context of dementia care at the end of life, particularly the supporting evidence. It has also been suggested that the UK MCA is in part responsible for facilitating shared decision making. The findings would suggest that, for the participants at least, the UK MCA was positively received. Evidence concerning the use of the UK MCA in practice is limited and this paper will contribute to the ongoing evaluation of its impact.

Conclusion

This exploration of the experiences of health care practitioners in the provision of palliative care for people with dementia has drawn attention to a number of ongoing problems and challenges in clinical practice. Data would support the notion that transition to good-quality palliative care continues to be the exception and that collaborative working relationships between acute and primary care, as well as among mental health specialists and others, are not always apparent. The paper does, however, point to examples of good practice. The data suggest that considerable development is required to help teams to build the internal resources available to them in order for them to be in a position to recognize the needs of people with dementia and meet the challenge they present. This would point to, for example, enhanced training around dementia care and communication. The paper also demonstrates evidence that the UK MCA is being used as a tool to help facilitate best-interest decision making. The use of these mechanisms, and others such as advanced care planning, should provide the focus for the establishment of continuity, sound decision making and trusting relationships between family carers and health care professionals.

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Conflict of interest
None declared.

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