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I glimpsed the future on several fronts as I read this article. First, it wades into the waters of the use of genomic information in the medical encounter. While genetic counseling is not new, what IS new is the idea that discussions about personal genomic information will be happening with increasing frequency outside of specialized genetic counseling sessions, by practitioners without any particular specialized genomic training. In a setting such as obesity, such information may have particular effects on both intra- and interpersonal domains, and this article explores such effects. Second, this project used virtual reality technology to simulate a medical encounter. While early in its evolution, this technology holds revolutionary potential and may have extraordinary promise for simulation and communication training.

NEWS FROM EUROPE

Walk-in homes for people living with cancer and their family members: A new Dutch communication and support approach

Anne van den Brom and Rosella den Hollander, master students at the Institute of Management of Care, Erasmus University, Rotterdam

Adriaan Visser. PhD, Research Institute Innovation in Care, Rotterdam University. Rotterdam

Correspondence: adriaan.visser@planet.nl

Dutch walk-in homes are a meeting place for people suffering from cancer and for their loved ones. A study was performed in order to assess to what extent the offered complementary activities and the psycho-social support in these houses are, as well as whether or not these homes are present, comparable to initiatives in other countries.

Introduction

Dutch walk-in homes are a meeting place for people suffering from cancer and for their family-members, friends and other loved ones. Walk-in homes are institutions based on private initiatives and funds. They offer several complementary activities as well as psycho-social support by trained volunteers. Walk-in homes generally have a low threshold; an appointment is not necessary. Most activities are free of charge. They are functioning independent of hospitals. In the meanwhile there are more than 80 houses in the Netherlands (1).

Evaluation study

An evaluation study was performed in order to find out to what extent the offered complementary activities and the psycho-social support fulfils the needs of the visitors (2, 3). We interviewed 34 visitors from 20 walk-in homes. Further, 711 visitors of 25 walk-in homes filled in a questionnaire (by post or by e-mail). The walk-in homes participated actively in the study. The coordinators of walk-in houses also filled in a questionnaire about the organization of the offered support in their homes.

We found that the walk-in homes offer a great variation of activities and support. The attitude of the visitors towards the homes is very positive. They are satisfied with the offered activities and support. The people with cancer and their family members are visiting the houses rather often and for a long time (2, 3).

Part of this study was an exploration of what can be learned of walk-in homes outside the Netherlands (4). This study is based on a literature search in Pubmed and Google Scholar using the following terms: psycho-oncologic care, walk-in houses, psychosocial support, evaluation and effects. We could not find much information about comparable initiatives in other countries. Therefore we did a survey among 115 researchers all over the world, working in the field of cancer, based on an authors list of Patient Education and Counseling. From 40 authors we did receive an answer (35%). Again, it did show that there are only a few initiatives applying the concept of walk-in homes as existing in the Netherlands. Below a few examples which we found.

Results

In table 1 we summarize the main results. If a country is not mentioned it means that we did not find information about it in the database and nor in the answers of the letters to the authors. In the reminder to them we stressed that no answer would be indicating that there was nothing like a walk-in home in their country.

Table 1: Information from the databases and the answers on the letters to the authors of PEC

Countries (alphabetic order)	Possible comparative initiatives in the country.
Australia	Some houses facilitated by the government, offer group activities by trained volunteers and nurses. Further, mainly support by telephone and the internet.
België	There were two walk-in homes from the Liga Against Cancer, but were closed due to lack of interest (5). Recently two new initiatives were founded. The Erika Thijs Home in Hasselt (Limburgse Kankerkoepel (6) and A Touch of Rose in Bornem/Willebroek, Psychosocial Oncological Well-being Center (7). Both initiatives are not officially related to hospitals.
Canada	Comparable initiatives are part of hospitals. Recently in Edmonton a private house has been founded, independent from hospitals, with emphasis on professional psychosocial support for emotional problems (8).

China	A pathologist in the field of cancer stated that such houses do not exist in China. This was confirmed by an author of a review on communication training in hospitals.
Denmark	There are some comparable initiatives, but always in cooperation with hospitals, like two houses by the foundation of you go.
Duitsland	Comparable initiatives are part of hospitals. An example is the foundation on Lebenswert (Life value) at the University of Köln, offering psychosocial and complementary care (9). In München is a house of the Bayern Cancer Foundation (Bayerische Krebsgesellschaft), partly financed by public money, organizing lectures and happenings (10).
Israel	Psychosocial support is part of the treatment in hospitals.
South Korea	There are no walking-in homes in South Korea, as also based on visits of one of the authors (AV).
UK	Comparable initiatives are part of hospitals. There are 20 Maggie's Centers based on a private initiative, with also foundations in Hongkong and Barcelona (11). Emphasis is on information supply and psychological support. Also the Macmillan Foundation is active in facilitating patient education, self-help- and support groups (12).
USA	Comparable initiatives are part of hospitals like the MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston (13) and the Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York (14) offering support groups in complementary therapies. The independent foundation Little Red Door Cancer Agency (15) offers financial support for less fortunate people with cancer.

So in Belgium, Germany, the UK and USA are a few comparable initiatives. However, it is important to note that these forms of psychosocial support in foreign countries are often functioning in cooperation with hospitals. But that is not the case for the Dutch walk-in homes. Also, support is frequently performed by telephone, e.g. by patient organizations, as also in the Netherlands, but this is

not seen as a core task of Dutch walk-in homes. Studies about the effects and evaluation among visitors of comparable organizations like walk-homes are not found.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that walk-in homes are rather an exclusive service in the Netherlands. This also means that we did not find information about evaluation and effect studies.

The overview of walk-in homes is a first inventarisatie in this field. It was difficult to find fitting search terms for walk-in homes. Although authors of PEC are well-known experts in the field of psycho-oncology, it may be selective group which could have been extended to e.g. authors in Psycho-Oncology. The response of the sent-off reminder emails was restricted, although we stressed that no answer would be interpreted that there is no walk-in homes in that particular country. Websites were sometimes not understandable due to not using the English language.

Why are walk-in-houses so exclusive for the Netherlands? The medical care is concentrated in hospital, while the extensive professional psychosocial care is mainly in specialized outside hospitals. Walk-in homes may fill up the gap between both types of care. Further, walk-in homes provide a more structured and continuing support than patient organizations. Finally, the initiative to found walk-in homes fits in the Dutch culture to take private initiatives in the health care. In the last century that did happen too for founding hospitals with their own denomination, and recently also happening for the founding of hospices. The interviews and questionnaire study will give more insight in the specific character of the Dutch walk-in homes.

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