Immediate versus delayed short-term integrated palliative care for advanced long-term neurological conditions: the OPTCARE Neuro RCT

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Declared competing interests of authors: Irene J Higginson was a member of the Health Technology Assessment Efficient Study Board (2015–16) and the Health Technology Assessment End of Life Care and Add-on Studies Board (2015–16). Wei Gao was member of the Health Technology Assessment End of Life Care and Add-on Studies Board (2015–16) and the Health Services and Delivery Research Commissioning Board (2009–15).

Disclaimer: This report contains transcripts of interviews conducted in the course of the research and contains language that may offend some readers.

Published September 2020
DOI: 10.3310/hsdr08360
Plain English summary

The OPTCARE Neuro RCT
Health Services and Delivery Research 2020; Vol. 8: No. 36
DOI: 10.3310/hsdr08360

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This study aimed to find out if short-term integrated palliative care altered symptoms or well-being for people living with long-term neurological conditions. It also studied the effects on their caregivers and on health and social care costs.

People living with multiple sclerosis, idiopathic Parkinson’s disease, motor neurone disease, multiple system atrophy or progressive supranuclear palsy, and with unresolved symptoms or complex needs, were recruited into the study across seven UK centres. Participants were randomly assigned by chance to receive either short-term integrated palliative care or standard care for 12 weeks. After 12 weeks, the standard care group also received short-term integrated palliative care. The circumstances of patients and caregivers in the two groups were compared at 12 weeks using questionnaires. A small number of people were also invited to talk more about their experiences in an audio-recorded interview. Health-care staff views were also sought through an online survey and focus groups.

A total of 350 patients and 229 caregivers were recruited. At 12 weeks there were no significant differences between the two groups. However, patients receiving short-term integrated palliative care showed an improvement from baseline to 12 weeks for several physical symptoms. The costs of care were also lower and there were no harmful effects, compared with standard care. Conversely, in the standard care group, care satisfaction lowered from baseline to 12 weeks. The in-depth interviews showed that the impact of short-term integrated palliative care encompassed three themes: (1) adapting to losses and building resilience, (2) attending to function, deficits and maintaining stability and (3) enabling caregivers to care.

Our results suggest that short-term palliative care confers more benefits than harm and costs less than standard care. Future research should focus on refining palliative care approaches for long-term neurological conditions, including better integration between neurology and palliative care, and improving the management of symptoms.
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This report

The research reported in this issue of the journal was funded by the HS&DR programme or one of its preceding programmes as project number 12/130/47. The contractual start date was in April 2014. The final report began editorial review in February 2019 and was accepted for publication in September 2019. The authors have been wholly responsible for all data collection, analysis and interpretation, and for writing up their work. The HS&DR editors and production house have tried to ensure the accuracy of the authors’ report and would like to thank the reviewers for their constructive comments on the final report document. However, they do not accept liability for damages or losses arising from material published in this report.

This report presents independent research funded by the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR). The views and opinions expressed by authors in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the NHS, the NIHR, NETSCC, the HS&DR programme or the Department of Health and Social Care. If there are verbatim quotations included in this publication the views and opinions expressed by the interviewees are those of the interviewees and do not necessarily reflect those of the authors, those of the NHS, the NIHR, NETSCC, the HS&DR programme or the Department of Health and Social Care.

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