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Distress in health care professionals

In pediatric oncology, challenges of emotional distress and existential issues are constantly present. The challenges imposed on health care professionals concern widely different areas such as palliative care, communication, decision-making, parental-professional interactions, working conditions, and pressure to rationalize and reduce costs. The work often requires dedicated time, and time constraints are well-known sources of high levels of stress, and may predict professional anxiety in end-of-life care. Medical successes, including new drugs for children with malignant diseases, have implied that palliative care can last for very long time. The palliative phase for children and parents, as well as health care professionals, may be described as a long walk between hope and despair. At the same time, health care professionals express the view that palliative care is an inevitable part of the work in pediatric oncology, and work at the border of life and death is very engaging. This opportunity to acquire an insight into central life issues increases one's own existential maturity, and the term "meaningfulness" is often used to express the dignity of the task. Still, there are today several reports which point to the risk of professional burnout characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced levels of personal accomplishment. The demanding and stimulating tasks in the field of pediatric oncology may be regarded as balancing processes in the practical clinical work. These processes might have very different themes, for example ethical dilemmas or adaptations to different organizational models. The variety of challenges and questions concerning the complexity of the work, and the caregiver's need for reflection time, support and education need to be highlighted. Implications and recommendations from a professional point of view will be discussed at the symposium.