

Managing evidence on palliative care: are Realist Reviews feasible?

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Background

Synthesizing evidence on interventions is often done through the use of an effectiveness approach. Its focus is to measure and report on the effectiveness of the interventions. A limitation is that they provide little explanation why the intervention works (or not) when applied in different contexts. Palliative care interventions may be complex, where outcome highly depends on the interaction between people and the context in which the intervention occurs. Realist reviews are important and innovative strategies to synthesize research results on complex interventions. So far however, few realist reviews are conducted within the domain of palliative care.

Aim

To evaluate the feasibility of realist review as approach to synthesize research results in palliative care.

Methods

Comparison of realist review with other review designs, its strengths and weaknesses.

Results

Simple interventions in palliative care (e.g. medication), can be measured through effectiveness reviews. Comparing to other systematic reviews, realist reviews focus on understanding the causal mechanisms by which complex interventions in a particular context produce certain outcomes. It borrows techniques of 'traditional' systematic reviews (e.g. its rigor), while articulating and testing theories, though the steps in the review process are overlapping and iterative. Moreover, data are synthesized to determine "what works, for whom, in what circumstances, in what respects and how?". As such a realist review is theory-driven and has an explanatory rather than an evaluative focus.

Conclusion

The realist review approach may be useful when synthesizing evidence on complex palliative care interventions or programs. It offers the opportunity to gain insight in the key factors which affect success or failure of the interventions through its analysis of both context and mechanisms. The resulting insights can be used when planning and implementing interventions at local, regional or national level.