

Some cancer center staff uncertain of services offered

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(HealthDay)—Staff members at nearly one in 10 major U.S. cancer

centers—all of which provide palliative care services—weren't certain such symptom-management and supportive care was actually available there, according to a study presented at the American Society of Clinical Oncology's annual Palliative Care in Oncology Symposium, held from Sept. 9 to 10 in San Francisco.

Kathryn Hutchins, a fourth-year medical student at Duke University in Durham, N.C., and colleagues used a "mystery shopper" approach—making 160 phone calls to 40 cancer centers on different days, asking about palliative and supportive care needs for a fictitious family member recently diagnosed with [inoperable liver cancer](#).

In nearly 10 percent of calls, staff members gave an answer other than "yes" when asked about the availability of [palliative care](#) services there, even though such services were indeed available. While answers varied, responses included inaccurate statements such as that palliative care was only for end-of-life patients; that no physicians there specialized in symptom management; or that a medical record review would be needed first. In other responses, the person answering the phone was unsure of either the availability of palliative care or didn't know what the term meant. Only about 38 percent of callers were correctly told that all seven supportive care services they asked about were offered at the cancer center.

"This kind of research speaks to the idea that when calling a major cancer center, there are people who have the same misconceptions [as the public] about palliative care," Hutchins told *HealthDay*. "The people we spoke to were warm and kind, but they didn't have the information we needed."

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