

# COVID-19 has major impact on psychosocial care of cancer patients

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Psychosocial needs of people affected by cancer are not being adequately met due to the disruption in services caused by COVID-19, a new report in the journal *Psycho-Oncology* reports.

During this unique study, researchers from six universities, as part of their work on the British Psychosocial Oncology Society Executive Committee, investigated how psychosocial support for those affected by cancer was impacted during the current COVID-19 pandemic.

Surveying 94 professionals working in the field of psychosocial oncology in the UK, the researchers identified a number of concerns regarding suspension of face-to-face delivery of care to those affected by the disease. Care is now being delivered remotely by staff at home or in some regions has been suspended entirely.

Those surveyed reported a decline in the number of patients referred to psychosocial services and expressed concern about the impact delays in accessing care would have on patients. The use of telephone/video calls to complete assessments with this group of patients was also found to be more difficult, particularly if there was no existing relationship between the two, making it harder to form a therapeutic alliance.

Dr. Kate Absolom, University Academic Fellow in the School of Medicine at the University of Leeds and chair of the British Psychosocial Oncology Society, supervised the research. She said: "The results from our survey clearly demonstrate the major upheaval COVID-19 has caused. There are significant ongoing concerns about funding and how services and research activity will be maintained in coming months and years. It's vital we monitor how the situation develops and work collaboratively other cancer organizations to mitigate challenges and continue developing psycho-oncology activity in the UK."

The research identified that a lack of face-to-face monitoring and [social isolation](#) has led to heightened feelings of anxiety and distress amongst some cancer communities, increasing the need for psychological support. Due to this increased demand and the temporary suspension of services delivering psychosocial support, advice and care, the needs of patients

may not be met.

The benefits of delivering care remotely to patients was highlighted by some respondents. Many noted that they were now able to assist patients who were previously unable to travel to them due to distance and illness and many welcomed the flexibility working from home offered to staff.

Dr. Jo Armes, Reader in Cancer Care and Lead for Digital Health at the University of Surrey and one of the study's authors, said: "Receiving a cancer diagnosis or living with cancer can be both physically and mentally devastating to a patient and their families. Feelings of depression and anxiety are common which negatively impacts their overall wellbeing. Moving psychosocial support to remote delivery, and in some cases suspending it all together, has proven to be difficult for staff to deliver and has resulted in the needs of patients affected by [cancer](#) not being met. Due to the current pandemic this has unfortunately been unavoidable but it is important that we learn from this experience and see what works well for patients and what doesn't so that plans can be put in place to deal with similar situations in the future."

The research was conducted in collaboration with Dr. Steph Archer (University of Cambridge), Dr. Trish Holch (Leeds Beckett University), Professor Claire Foster and Dr. Lynn Calman (University of Southampton), Dr. Sarah Gelcich (University of Leeds) and Dr. Sara MacLennan (University of Aberdeen).

The research, "No turning back: Psycho-oncology in the time of COVID-19: Insights from a survey of UK professionals," has been published in the journal *Psycho-Oncology*.

**More information:** Stephanie Archer et al. No turning back: Psycho-oncology in the time of COVID-19: Insights from a survey of UK professionals, *Psycho-Oncology* (2020). [DOI: 10.1002/pon.5486](https://doi.org/10.1002/pon.5486)

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